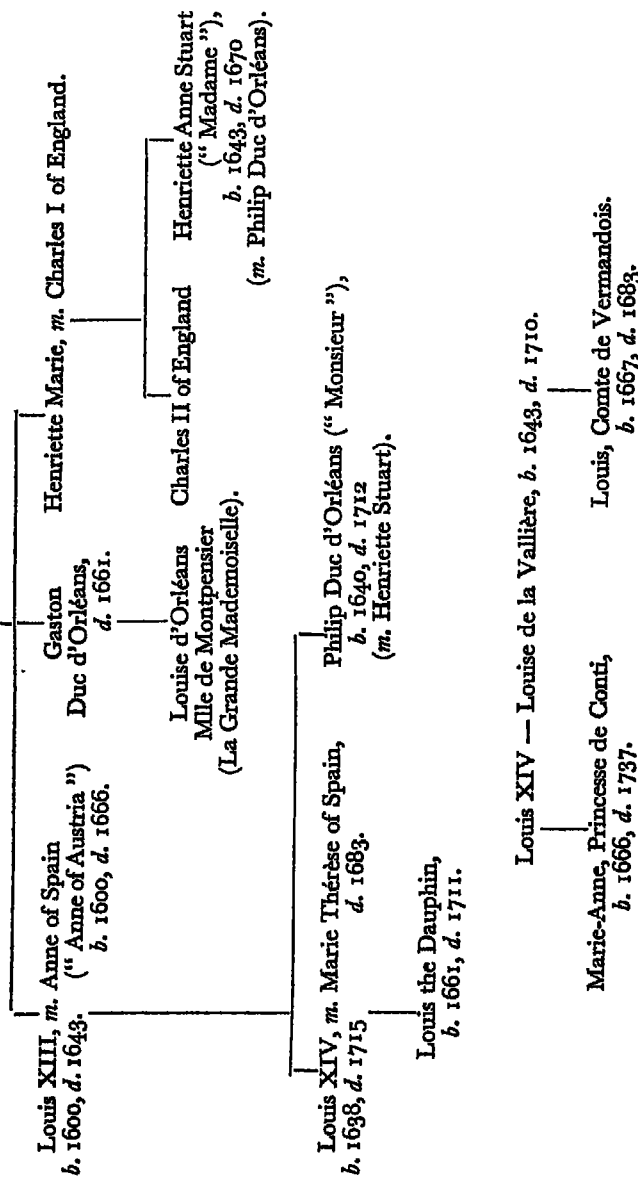


GENEALOGICAL TREE OF THE PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS IN THIS STORY.

HENRI IV, d. 1610; m. (2) Marie de Médicis.



A HEART LIKE MINE

BY

CICELY ASHTON-JINKS

Author of "Child of Promise"



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and Sydney .

TO
MY CHILDREN
THÉRÈSE, ROSE AND RUTH

First published, 1946

L'amour à qui je dois et mon bien et mon mal,
Que ne lui donniez-vous un cœur comme le mien
Ou que n'avez vous fait le mien comme les autres ?

From the Sonnet ascribed to Louise de la Vallière.

Ad Principem ut ad Ignem, Amor Indissolubilis.

*Motto inscribed over hearthstone in the ruins
of Château la Vallière.*

THIS book does not in any way set out to be an historical biography. It is an attempt to portray that strange and little-known character, Louise de la Vallière, whose generous and elusive personality first attracted me when viewing the *Trésor* in Nôtre Dame in 1913. "Christ en ivoire, donné par le Roi Louis XIV à Madame de la Vallière . . ." gabbled the *gardien*, indicating a plain crucifix suspended behind a door and hurrying away to more spectacular exhibits. . . .

I should like to express my indebtedness first to Eleanor Witty for much generous help and valuable criticism ; to Mr. Walter Hutchinson for his kind permission to reproduce the portrait on the cover ; to Sidney Vogler for allowing me to quote from his poem "After Long Changes," and to my daughter Rose—that notable Finder of words and phrases.

CICELY ASHTON-JINKS.

Hendon, 1943—Beaconsfield, 1945.

PROLOGUE

This unfortunate Princess lived with the most humble appointments a Queen has ever known. Subject to the most severe limits, without pomp, without authority, without a Court.

*Angelo Cares, Venetian Ambassador to France
writing of Anne, wife of Louis XIII and
daughter of Philip III of Spain.*

THE winter of 1637 set in early. By the middle of November the countryside of Northern France was already hard underfoot, with sharp frosts in the morning and next to no rain. Day after day the sky stayed high and clear with only a few splashes of small very white clouds to vary the bright un-warming sunshine. Good weather for hunting and for shooting too, with the grey goose in the sky and even the stay-at-homes, plover, woodcock and thrushes, flying southward with purposeful agitation, creatures knowing their business and what called them.

The fifth of December opened clear and bright as usual, but towards afternoon the sky became overcast and then leaden, the light turned yellow, it grew colder, the mild breeze dropped; the air waited, motionless, as if holding its breath before the outbreak of the storm.

It broke with fury. Lightning struck like a sword, smiting trees to earth and casting down a church-steeple; thunder in its wake rolled like passion through the naked woods and over the shaven fields. The rain flung itself down; driven by a sudden powerful wind it thrashed at the defenceless countryside and leapt up again from it, drowning the pallid daylight so that in a moment the afternoon was turned to night.

Never in memory had Paris known such a tempest. Caught by the onslaught folk scurried for any shelter; horses stampeded; in a few moments the gutters were overflowing, tiles and shop signs clattering down. On the Pont Neuf, in the confusion of stall-keepers struggling to haul down their booths and carry off their wares, several persons were

knocked down and trampled underfoot. Boats at anchor on the Seine were swamped and dragged under, and one great wave leapt the river bank and the wall beyond and sluiced out a stable yard of the Louvre and one of the stable boys.

In the great Palace, dismantled and shut up for the most part, since the King was at his hunting-lodge at Versailles and only a few apartments were kept open for the Queen Consort, the Spanish woman, the unfortunate and disgraced Anne of Austria,* servants ran for lamps and candles, closing windows in haste and banging-to the shutters.

"What weather," grumbled the upper varletry, who grumbled at most things in that dull, unremunerative service; "God is angry!" said the lower sort; but almost everyone crossed themselves from forehead to waist when the thunder roared out again.

Queen Anne sat by a good fire in the chamber which was her bedroom, her boudoir, and often her supper-room as well when she felt averse to the public meal eaten under the watchful eyes of servants, many of whom she knew to be the spies of her mortal enemy, the Cardinal Minister. She sat with her feet on a footstool placed in front of the blazing pine clumps, and with a fur-lined mantle over her shoulders, for she felt the cold intensely.

The three long windows of the chamber were protected by shutters kept in place by iron bars and covered by rather shabby curtains of blue and red velvet. But the badly fitting shutters rattled in the angry gusts, the iron stays clanked dismally. Like fetters, thought the Queen. Now and again the curtains puffed out in the draught and then the candles would waver, the rugs on the floor lift; it seemed as though but a little and the storm would burst through into the very room.

"What a night!" said Anne for the fifth time, and on her lips the words meant also, "What a country! What a life!"

She feared the cold which gave her rheumatism and the land which gave her nothing but hostility and persecution, and most of all she dreaded the life of loneliness, humiliation and fear which had been hers since her sixteenth year

* Infanta of Spain, Queen-Consort of France; she was commonly known by this title, derived from the Empire ruled over by the Hapsburgs.

—that year, called the Magnificent, when she had left Spain and her loving father to marry the boy-King of France.

"It'll turn to snow, Madame," said the woman who sat on a stool at a little distance, her back against the wall, some black knitting in her mittened hands. She was a little elderly person, sallow and stout and wore a quilted black gown with puffed skirts and a goffered lawn cap over neat grey curls which corkscrewed in bunches each side of her face and fell evenly to her white lawn collar.

"When it snows, 'twill be warmer," she added, and her voice offered a consolation.

This woman, Señora Estafania, had followed her mistress from Madrid twenty-three years earlier and was almost the only one of that Spanish retinue who had weathered the King's aversion and Richelieu's mistrust. The others—Chaplains, Physicians, Equerries, Ladies-in-waiting, even her very dressers and seamstresses, sooner or later all who showed love and loyalty to the Infanta-Queen, had been sent back to Spain. Estafania's twinkling brown eyes had seen them depart, some indignant, a few in tears, most only thankful to get out of it all. Their successors, the French men and women selected first by Anne's unfriendly mother-in-law, the intriguing Marie de Médicis, and after her fall from power by a far more redoubtable enemy, the Cardinal Richelieu, fared no better. None who might even be suspected of sympathy for the Queen Consort kept their place long. And since Anne, by nature affectionate and trusting, and by ill-fate lonely and neglected, inevitably gave her confidence to those around her, her little Court seethed with gossip. Unimportant in itself, but always sufficient cause for the King's jealousy and the Minister's mistrust. One by one her French friends and well-wishers were dismissed—lucky if only dismissed. Señora Estafania had witnessed many things worse than disgrace and exile. Yet somehow, by luck or chance, she remained to rub away her Princess's rheumatism, to concoct her cordials and ointments after the infallible Spanish recipes, to say Novenas with her when Heavenly aid appeared the last recourse for earthly extremities, to croon her to sleep, and even, at the height of the great troubles, to creep into the huge, lone bed and hold her as a mother.

A stupid little old woman who had no letters and could

scarcely speak a word of French at the end of more than twenty years. Such a one was too thick-witted for plots and invisible ink and secret signals to greatly daring lovers. Nobody about the Queen liked or disliked Estafania : a valuable qualification in a servant, thought His Eminence, the Cardinal-Minister.

When the Señora spoke now she looked above her knitting and towards her mistress and advised her, " Drink up your milk while it's hot, my lamb," and saw that the other was crying to herself ; softly, since beyond the half-open door leading to the next room the Queen's women, Madame de Sencey and Mademoiselle Filandre, the Cardinal's nominees, were yawning away the evening over a game of Reversi.

Estafania crept over to her mistress. On her knees and whilst re-heating the milk, she whispered that her precious was not to weep, that she was far too good for them all ; she was as pretty as a picture in her new blue silk, the colour just matched her eyes, these far too pretty to be spoiled by tears, and much more of cheer and consolation.

The Queen dabbed her eyes and sipped at the hot drink ; she kissed her companion. " Pretty, Estafania ! My dear soul, nearly thirty-seven and I'm losing my teeth and my shape. Just look at these fingers, twice their size with this miserable rheumatism ! "

" The prettiest lady ever ! " averred Estafania stoutly.

There was some truth in this loving exaggeration. Anne might be thirty-seven and her figure thickening, here and there a sprinkle of grey in the thick red-brown curls, but her complexion was rosy and clear, the prominent blue eyes bright and expressive, the elaborately curled hair spiralled down on to shoulders which gleamed like satin beneath the dark fur wrap. She made an attractive picture sitting there in the candlelight and firelight, in her rich sapphire brocade, patterned in gold with a row of little puce-coloured bows to fasten the front of the close-fitted bodice ; a delicate lace collar to set off the full white throat, and cuffs to match falling over the plump white hands. A woman looking younger than her years because of a rounded figure not yet stout, and more so by grace of an expression of wistful simplicity which might easily have belonged to a girl in her 'teens.

" I'll make up this fire," went on Estafania loudly and cheerfully, " and I'll just slip out to make sure those wenches

warm the bed properly ; some of them seem scared of a warming-pan." Then, as the wind howled out again and the communicating door banged-to, she added, " Now, there's a kind storm for you, Lady dear ! Smacks the door in their ugly faces and doesn't even blow the smoke down our chimney ! Now I'll pray they're too lazy to get up and open it. When I come back I'll lay out the cards and tell your fortune."

Anne laughed ; the slamming of the door had pleased her. " Oh, dear soul ! I know mine by heart ! "

The thought of the many triumphant fortunes Estafania had predicted for her over the years depressed her. She decided that she herself had finished with superstition and the deceiving hopes of a happy future. But she was too fond of her old friend to reject her kindly artifices. With a smile to show the old nurse she was not so very unhappy after all, she said, " I'll tell yours for a change, Mamanga."

So, the great affair of the warming-pan settled to her satisfaction, Estafania placed a low table by the Queen's chair and seated herself on a cushion beside it. Indulgent and languid, the Queen dealt. Under the white, ringed fingers the brightly-coloured cards fluttered down ; kings, queens and knaves, all in modish costume, soldiers carrying aces on a banner, and all when rejected and turned face down displayed on their backs the Castle of Castille with a pendant elephant dangling by a belly band.

Anne turned up the signature card. " You're the two of Hearts, Estafania."

" And a fine card, too," said the Spanish woman. " Two Hearts—yours and mine, not a doubt of it ! "

" You're going on a journey ! "

" That's not a journey, Lady dear. That's an enemy ; a dark man. But the Hearts Cavalier'll set him to the rightabout ! Turn him over. What's this ? " Estafania pored over the cards, her fallow face intent. " Take them, Madame," she commanded. " Mine to shuffle."

She mixed the pack thoroughly and the Queen dealt again. Anne was not thinking of the game but of her troubles. The catastrophe of a year ago. She had been guilty of nothing but indiscretion in those intercepted letters to her brother : the sister's hope that the war would not injure him. But her words had been twisted and exaggerated. She had used cypher. Enough and more than enough for

the Cardinal's purpose when France was at war with Spain and feeling ran high. For years Richelieu had sworn to break her and he *had* broken her.

The cards fell from her hands and scattered on the little table.

"I'm sorry, Estafania. You finish, my dear," she said.

Her mind wandered to her faithful servants. De Jars snatched by a last minute reprieve from the very scaffold, Laporte still in the Bastille, and a year of prison and pitiless inquisition powerless to shake their loyalty. This should be some salve to the pride wounded beyond bearing at that intolerable interview with Richelieu.

Sitting back, her face absent, her eyes sad, while Estafania, muttering to herself, manipulated the cards, the Queen shuddered as she lived through the scene again. She had been compelled to humble herself to her tyrant, to beg his intercession with her husband, to own herself at fault and sign the confession the Cardinal had dictated, standing at her elbow. Only thus, he made it clear, could she escape a public trial ending in—who knows?—divorce or worse. He had permitted himself a gibe at Queen Consorts found out in double-dealing. An incredible phrase concerning the wives of the English King Henry VIII had escaped those thin, tight lips. And she had had to force herself to endure it meekly, to thank him for his good offices, to offer him the hand he had refused with a bow of deferential insolence.

Anne clenched that hand as she sat there. And that final interview when the man in scarlet with the hateful, thin, ascetic face and pitiless searching eyes had brought her the King's pardon—on conditions. Never to write another letter that was not censored by her new waiting-lady, Madame de Sencey. Never to leave the Palace, even for a drive, without the Royal permission. "For which you will be good enough to apply to me," the Cardinal had concluded.

If only her brother could have known how she was treated! Surely even he, sick and defeated, would have been roused to do something for an Infanta of Spain so shamefully used.

"It's coming out nicely, Madame!" Estafania's satisfied voice recalled her. "Shuffle again, my Princess lovely!"

Since the catastrophe Anne had only seen her husband in public and then rarely. The bitter scenes of their earlier years were preferable to this absolute indifference. She

wondered if he would ever relent to her, this strange, hostile man who had been her husband in name since her childhood and for a few months her husband in fact.

"It is twenty years ago," she told herself as she shuffled for the final round. She remembered him as dumb and without understanding, but the seventeen-year-old girl, warm-hearted and sensitive, had easily apprehended that their marriage was to him a distasteful necessity. He had left her with a sort of speechless indifference. She had been hurt and humiliated to the full—and for no end. The hope that even this brief and loveless union might give her a child had ended in disappointment. A failure like everything else in her life. That was the be-all and end-all of her existence. Neither King nor Minister, nor a dozen Spanish wars could have cast down the Mother of the Dauphin, but since she had failed in motherhood she had failed in everything.

"Whatever will become of me!" she thought.

Estafania struck the table in triumph.

"Look!" She pointed to the eclipse of Diamonds and Clubs—to all the wicked Spades cast out in a heap. Only the two of Hearts remained, companioned by the Ace on one side and the Heart Queen on the other. The Spanish woman's eyes sparkled with happiness. "It's the best fortune I've ever had. You on one side, my Queen of Hearts, and my Wish on the other!"

Anne smiled at her delight. "Tell me your Wish, Estafania!"

The other shook her head. "Telling stops it coming true."

The Queen gave a little yawn. "Well, I hope it's going home to Spain for both of us." She broke off. "Hush! Hark! Whatever's that?"

Both women looked to the windows.

"It sounds like a chimney falling down," said the attendant.

"I believe it's horses," said the Queen, and her face fell still. The Señora ambled over to the window and stood there listening, her hand over her mouth.

"I'd best go down and see what it is." She jerked her head towards the communicating door. "Before *they* start prying," she said.

She was back in a few minutes. Lips pursed and a finger raised for silence, she stole across the room to the further

door and very carefully turned the key in the lock. Turning back to her Mistress she whispered, "Don't be frightened! Don't cry out! The King is here!"

Anne started. "Oh, no, Estafania! No! Why?"

The other, her hand on her arm, hastened to calm her. In quick low tones she assured her there was nothing to fear. It was only that the King had been caught in the storm on his way to St. Maur. He had been forced to take shelter and was drenched to the skin. Everyone in his company was drenched to the skin. "Like drowned rats!" cried the Señora gleefully. "And all the folk below at their wits' end! No fires! No cheer! The King's rooms empty as a barn—not a bed in them!"

Someone was knocking at the locked door.

"You wait a moment, you!" She shook her fist at the women outside. "Don't be scared, my Princess: just hearken to me."

Solemnly and emphatically she counselled her lady, for her own blessed good, to use this unexpected visit to her advantage: to let bygones be bygones and give her husband a welcome and a good supper. "Here by the fire, just the two of you. The shortest way to a man's heart lies through his stomach!"

She had no time for more. That agitated knocking must be attended to. In leisurely fashion she fumbled with the door before unlocking it, told the indignant Madame de Sencey that she had turned the key long ago to prevent the door rattling. Such a racket made the Queen's head ache. "You must have been having a nap then, if you didn't hear it. It was rattling fit to shake the key out!"

But never mind all that. Her Majesty was awaiting the King; he was just coming up. No, their attendance was not required. Her orders were that these ladies should abide in the antechamber. They would be rung for if the Queen desired their presence.

Closing the door firmly on a dumbfounded and uncertain couple, she began to bustle about the hearth, putting the cards away, replacing them on the table by a basket of needlework, arranging her Mistress's gown, folding up her shawl and twisting a curl or two round her dexterous chubby fingers.

Anne's stupefied brain could hardly keep pace with the stream of admonitions and instructions.

A HEART LIKE MINE

PART ONE

CHAPTER I

1638-1652

THE great storm left imprints as great upheavals of necessity do. For years to come a high-water mark notched on the grey stones of the Louvre quayside was to be pointed out to curious visitors. All that winter great elms which had taken centuries to build lay prone, stricken giants, in many a bereaved forest; all that winter, too, and for years to come, the parishioners of St. Germain des Champs must trudge five miles to Mass whilst their unfortunate Curé struggled to collect alms to rebuild their humble church; and not least among the consequences of that storm might be counted the birth of a child who, at the age of four, was called to the heritage of all France, her glories and her disasters.

The boy could not remember a time when he had not been the King. For him the word "father" meant a great dark picture in a heavy gold frame; a figure dark as its background except for a bright blue sash and a shining many-pointed star on the grey armour of its breast. The word "Cardinal" stood, not for his mother's mortal enemy, wicked Richelieu, dead six months before that unknown father, but for another Minister, redoubtable as he but beneficent, infallible in wisdom, his mother's and his own best friend.

Queen Anne never wearied of telling her little son how good the great Cardinal Mazarin was, how strong to defend them, how much he loved them all. In the heart of the child the Minister ranked as foster-father, a protection standing behind mother-love, less vocal, less in daily evidence, but always reassuringly there.

To judgment less infatuated than that of a woman of forty for the first time in love, it might have seemed that the man she had chosen from all others to rule France had little aptitude for affection. Jules Mazarin's heart was enslaved to statesmanship, his life's passion. Spinning the web of a policy which should ensnare Royal Spain, the English Dictator Cromwell, the Republican Netherlands—a web from the centre of which France, his powerful France, his creation, should control Western Europe, every day was too short for him. He sighed to remember that he was turned fifty and in miserable health.

Religion was a name to him ; love another. Cardinal of the Holy Roman Church, he had never taken Orders, never taken a wife. He served the Regent, Queen Anne, loyally and with a great show of respect, but the love of the middle-aged woman meant little beyond a useful means to an end. If his heart held warmth for any human soul it was for the child in whose name he ruled. It was not love, it was the interest of the Master in his pupil, the pride of the creator in his handiwork. He, the man of nothing, the foreigner, had saved France, steered her safely through Civil War and Spanish invasion, and the treason of her Princes. He had raised her up, made her respected and secure. In his eyes the boy-King stood for France, the France of to-morrow, the glorious forbidden to-morrow when the incurable pain gnawing at his vitals should have put an end to his ministry, his power, the great fortune he had amassed—to himself. But just as he could not hate his achievement because he must leave it, so he had no jealousy of the child who should garner the harvest he had sown. The boy was more than a son, an heir, he was his fulfilment itself. His heart stiffened with pride at the thought that the royal boy, in feature his father's son with his mother's handsome eyes and abundant chestnut hair, should be spiritually his conception. He had no tenderness for him, the dangers and hardships in which his youth was cast roused no compassion ; he could understand nothing of the effect of fear and insecurity on the impressionable heart of a child. Let young Louis and his brother fare plainly, go in outgrown clothes, have holes in their sheets and no money in their pockets : extravagance is the curse of Princes. As for education, his jealousy could not permit that any other distinguished intelligence should direct his King ; besides, the more book-learning the less common-

sense. A Prince should ride well, carry himself with dignity, speak with ease, enjoy good health. He suffered the Queen Mother to teach her sons dancing and courtesy and etiquette—such follies have their uses. As for the real business of a sovereign—government—the best master was experience ; the next, example.

This vital education he kept in his own hands. From an early age he saw to it that young Louis was included in the private conferences with the Regent, casually at first, as a child occupied with his toys, beneath the conversation of his elders. During such discussions he took care to use simple terms, to make statecraft seem interesting and glorious and the business of a man. Later on he stressed expediency, held up successful sharp practice as a model, scorned weak-kneed humanity and all vacillation and took as his moral that the desired end justifies the means.

He rarely addressed the boy directly on these topics, but he told himself that unless Louis were a fool—and that he could never bring himself to admit—some of all this must stick fast. He was careful of the company the royal children kept : through their mother he chose governors, tutors and confessors and even the few companions admitted to their games. Above all he introduced Louis to the great pastime of Kings—War ! In this one department of government he knew himself deficient. In youth he had had some experience in arms, but he was no General. In war he must depend upon, and mistrust, others than himself. His King should be at no such disadvantage, he should be his own Commander-in-Chief.

During the later years of the Civil War, from the time he was thirteen, the boy followed him and the armies, lived in camps and through sieges, slept hard, was on the march and in the saddle till exhausted, knew what it was to be under fire, to see wounds and bloodshed, to hear the bawdy talk of soldiers and the debates of Generals, lived in the world where human life is cheap and no price too high for victory.

The Minister watched him patiently, and, a past-master in the study of mankind, was baffled by an apparent simplicity.

"Are you satisfied with His Majesty's health and progress, M. du Villeroy ?" he would ask now and again. The governor was not enthusiastic. The King was still very

childish for his age. Villeroy was the Cardinal's man, and knew he was expected to speak frankly.

"He behaves like a child; no one would guess him fourteen."

"Oh come, M. le Marquis! Perhaps he thinks more than he says."

Villeroy, a tall, thin man with a nervous, restless face, shook his head. "Yes, but of what, Your Eminence? He never talks of much beyond his horses or his dogs or a new weapon maybe—and little then."

"Nothing else?"

The gentleman's laugh was slighting. "I believe he's taken a fancy to a new ballad. He was singing it over and over again in his bed last night—humming, I should rather say."

"One of those rubbishy popular ditties, I take it, from Paris?"

"It sounded like rubbish to me."

"Well, well!" The Cardinal's smile was fixed, but gracious. "Well, well! We must hope his Majesty will grow up in time!"

The following day Stenai fell and they went on to the next objective through the beautiful Lorraine valleys, green and rich under the August sunshine.

The troops were in high spirits after their victory, the men sang popular choruses as they marched. The Cardinal arranged that the young King should ride for a time by the side of his superb mule with its gorgeous scarlet trappings. Surrounded by the Royal Guards, Marshal Turenne and the officers of his staff, the boy sat his horse easily looking straight before him. Now and again he sang too, but quietly as if to himself. Mazarin did his best to catch the words, but the jangling of harness and clatter of hooves drowned them.

Presently he caught the descent of the dark eyes.

"Latin, Sir?"

"Oh, that, Monseigneur? It's from the Asperges." He added, "It's a good tune," looked between his horse's ears again and once more began to hum.

Thus enlightened the Cardinal recognized the words:

*"I saw water flowing from the right side of the Temple, Alleluia!
And all to whom that water came were saved and sang Alleluia!
Alleluia!"*

The Cardinal felt disturbed. Surely the lad was not growing pious? The taciturnity that was never discourteous was discouraging, and he determined to get beneath it.

"You have a taste for sacred music, Sir?"

The lad stopped singing, again. "Pardon, Monseigneur. I like all kinds of music. That's a good tune they're singing behind there." The Minister listened to the good tune. He thought it sounded a rough, rowdy affair, but the singers were at a distance, the words indistinguishable.

Louis took it up:

*"Si le Roy m'avait donné
Paris sa grande Ville,
J'aime mieux ma mie,
Oh gai,
J'aime mieux ma mie!"*

Now he sang in a clear treble, without self-consciousness. The Cardinal thought, "It's time his voice began to break!" He said, "Very nice—but scarcely a marching song, I should think."

Louis agreed it was not a marching song, and in a moment was singing his Latin again.

Mazarin felt nonplussed. The lad was neither hostile nor sullen, but as usual one could get nothing out of him. Was it, as Villeroy thought, because there was nothing beneath that façade of healthy good looks? He observed the full, rounded profile. The features were good, but rather heavy, the hooked nose too long, though it gave character to the face, the blue eyes lay soft under marked eyebrows and a mane of bright brown hair, curling and tied with scarlet ribbons floated out in the breeze.

"He may be slow but I'll swear he's not effeminate." Not like his brother. Philip was quick enough—he could chatter intelligently on a dozen subjects and at the least encouragement; he would imitate people like a young parrot, flatter them too if it suited him. Be obliging, insolent, witty, in the same half-hour and dissimulate all the time. The Minister felt he could have done a lot with Philip. It was a pity to be obliged to abandon the clever lively child to the spoiling of his Mother and her pack of women. He regretted, but he never questioned the wisdom of this subordination. France had had too many turbulent younger sons. Better that Philip should waste his life with talents

frustrated and stunted than that a second Gaston d'Orléans should emerge, a traitor to his King and a menace to his country. As for Louis, the enigma of a boy of fourteen should not be indecipherable to one who had read the minds of Europe's wildest diplomats. He set to work again.

"The gentleman does not appear to rate Your Majesty's capital very highly!"

The young face appeared to consider. "I don't think Paris is worth a lot."

This was comprehensible. Both King and Minister had received their fill of indignity from rebellious Paris. But it was not to be encouraged.

"I am sure Your Majesty does not confuse the City with its unruly elements. Paris is the finest capital in the world."

Again consideration. The words when they came, came slowly. "I mean—I don't like the town. All those dirty streets—they smell foul!"

The Cardinal told himself that either the boy was a good fencer or he was a simpleton, and never could he admit this. He began to outline a scheme for improving Paris, whereof the main expense should fall on the noble owners of great mansions. He explained it in easy interesting fashion. The boy listened with apparent attention, asked a question or two, and at the end of it all Mazarin was just where he had started.

The cavalcade rode on. M. du Villeroy, a few yards in the rear of his royal charge, admonished the indignant M. Laporte, the King's gentleman-valet, to increase his endeavours to interest His Majesty in more serious pursuits. He inferred with an absence of tact that His Eminence was not too content with Laporte's discharge of his important duties. In this way he endeavoured to pass on his uneasiness lest the Cardinal's remarks might be the first sign of dissatisfaction with himself. He regarded the Minister's back, jogging up and down before him. A sloping, dejected back. He would give a good deal to know what the great man was thinking.

Mazarin, tired, his indigestion increasing with every mile, was still engaged in trying to fathom what lay behind the impassive young brow.

Thus men conjectured and were uneasy while young Louis, upright and easy in his saddle, rode with enjoyment singing beneath his breath, "Alleluia! Alleluia!"

He sang because it made him happy. It reminded him of his Coronation a few weeks earlier. That was the Day of his life. He had woken to sunshine and the song of birds, the weather a lovely omen. They had called him at seven, he already dressed lying on a bed of state in the Archbishop's Palace at Rheims. They had clothed him in a long red tunic embroidered with gold : the robe of King and Priest. A knocking on his door ; repeated ; again. The dignitaries of the Church demanding him three times by name in conformity with ancient custom :

" We seek Louis, whom God has given us to be our King ! "

The Prelates, gorgeous in their crimson and purple, led him in stately procession to the Cathedral, he treading the softness of a deep blue carpet patterned with the pale lilies of France. Musketeers in silver and blue held back the jostling, eager masses. Above, every window and balcony was gay with flags and draperies and black with people. Cheering crashed out like thunder : the chanting of the priests was lost in it.

The tumult bewildered him as he walked through it, apart, fenced in by priests as by a bodyguard. They fell away from him and disclosed the Cathedral towering in grey and imperishable majesty. At the top of the broad steps by the wide-flung doors another group of ecclesiastics waited to receive and asperse the King. The sunlight turned the stiff magnificence of copes and dalmatics to shimmering sheets of gold and silver. Clouds of incense rose from thuribles, glittering as they swung. Holy water shone in the air like jewelled rain. Acclamation roared out again as the bishops stood back on either side to reveal the young figure mounting the steps alone. Within, the church, vast and dim, embraced him with the chill of a sea. He caught his breath, then the choir burst forth in welcome. Voices, glorious, rapturous, inviting his responsive soul. Accompanied by the lovely chorus, befriended, loving it, he moved slowly up the centre aisle, each footstep a measured interval as he had been taught, till he reached the Sanctuary. Thrones, Dominions, Powers, all were waiting ; all in order and perfection around the High Altar glittering with tiered candles like a tower of flowers aflame. Every genuflection the gorgeous Prelates made, every gesture, every vessel, each versicle those matchless voices sang, all had their part and their significance. The august ritual was carried out with high dignity, full of

grace and reverence. The boy's heart answered to it. He was enthralled by the symmetry and order of this beauty ; nothing too little, nothing too much, no discordance, nothing out of place. In preparation for the Holy Eucharist he was fasting from midnight, but he was unconscious of hunger or fatigue. When they led him to the dais to present him to the immense congregation, the face it beheld was that of a serene child. He did not hear the sonorous challenge, "Does any man deny Louis XIV to be our King?" He was oblivious of the sea of faces stretching wide beneath him. His senses were saturated : sight and hearing could accept no more.

"Gloria ! Gloria in Excelsis. Alleluia ! Alleluia !"

He lay prone before the altar, remembering that he did this in token of his nothingness before God. He was anointed with the Holy Oil of St. Remy, used only at the crowning of a King of France. The sword of Charlemagne was borne before him. They placed a ring on his finger, pledge of his marriage this day with France. At last the Archbishop lowered the Crown of Charlemagne to the brown and curly head, for a moment the boy felt the heavy weight whilst all the bells crashed out, drowning the voices of the choristers and as sweet as they.

"Long live the King ! Long live the King !"

The Coronation Mass followed, he enthroned to hear it till the time when he must kneel and strike his breast—*Unworthy, unworthy, unworthy !* The Celebrant brought to him Host and Chalice—the Chalice a unique privilege reserved for the newly-crowned alone.

After his Thanksgiving they led him to the Archbishop again. The boy, carefully rehearsed, knew what he must do at every stage, and that kneeling at the Primate's feet he must now listen with respect to an exhortation.

It was short. Perhaps the venerable man was weary, perhaps he thought young limbs might ache as well as aged ones. The old voice, cracked and not very distinct, began with the holiness and dignity of the occasion. He reminded the boy of the circumstances of his birth, that for long years his father had had no heir, of the goodness of the Almighty who had not permitted the direct line to be extinguished and had sent him—the Dieu-Donné—the Gift of God—to be the blessing of his parents and his people. He spoke of the royal forefathers who had knelt on these ancient

stones and received this same unction and consecration. There had been great Kings among them, men of valour in their generation ; law-givers, warriors, even a Saint, raised to the Altars of the Church. Another had been called the Father of his People. These were the truly great Kings, models for their descendant's imitation. The husky voice broke off ; the old man cleared his throat. Then he leant forward a little. The boy thought he was about to whisper confidentially to him. He looked up expectantly at the grey, furrowed face as the Archbishop's low, tremulous tones told him that henceforth he was above all men, anointed, consecrated, set apart ; that no man might disobey his just commands without sin. He was Lord and Master, Priest and King, eldest son of Holy Mother Church, Heaven's Deputy on earth for France and accountable to none save God alone, "At whose Judgment Seat you must account for your People and your Kingship. A mighty responsibility, but the grace of God will be sufficient for you, my son."

The Homage which followed was a descent from the highest. He discovered that he was tired and hungry and very hot. His Mother curtsying to the ground before she kissed his hand ; the Papal Legate, the Archbishop—at close view two old men exhausted under their heavy vestments, rising with difficulty from their knees ; Philip with an impish grin of private understanding, thoroughly enjoying himself in his fine suit and ermine-trimmed mantle (Philip had had *his* breakfast !), Uncle Gaston, the cousin Princes, the great Vassals of the Throne, these were no actors of perfection. Some got to their knees awkwardly, one advanced out of turn. It was nearly an hour before the last of the trains and jewels and feathers retired, by which time his head ached and he could hardly hold his hand up, so stiff it was.

Back in the Palace his mother put her arms around him and kissed him on both cheeks. She poured him wine herself and gave him broth and chicken. Philip told him of some little incidents during the ceremony which had struck him as excruciatingly comic. The brothers laughed again and again. Uncle Gaston looked on disapprovingly. The King ought to rest after such a monstrous fatigue. He, for one, would not undergo such an ordeal for a dozen Kingdoms !

Cardinal Mazarin conferring apart with an official who

held some papers, looked up with the shadow of a smile before resuming his conversation. Louis caught the urbane, irresistible voice.

"A bounty for the City? Out of the question! It will be difficult enough to defray the expenses of the Coronation as it is. We look like having to levy a special tax. Coronations are costly affairs, good sir!"

Ever since he could remember anything he had been the King. In contrast, his early life had been spent against a background of trouble and the disorders of Civil War. It had not saddened his nature. More than surroundings of anxiety and insecurity is needed to darken a childhood. He had the essentials: his Mother's love, health, and the joy of all young things in life. The seriousness of the Royal family's position passed him by. It had been an exciting adventure to a boy of nine to flee from the Palais Royal in the middle of the winter's night to a St. Germain where there had been no fires and no comfort; where he and Philip had shared a single bed while his tall cousin, Mlle Marie-Louise de Montpensier, and his governess had to be content with a heap of straw. It was a picnic to drink from earthenware mugs and scramble with Philip for the pieces of an omelette. The barricades in the Paris streets, the hand-to-hand fighting, boys of his own age trailing pikes and staggering under cross-bows, were not menacing signs of the times; they were delightful, breath-taking, fairy-tales.

Even the tragic story of his Uncle Charles, the English King, did not frighten the child of ten. He had never known his uncle. Henceforth he pictured him as a second Joan of Arc, leading his people in a Holy War to die a martyr in the Cause of Kings. An inspiring legend, not a grim warning to himself.

He was a docile child; even-tempered, easily made gay by simple pleasures. The Royal nursery was rather a lonely one. One or two selected boys, sons of the high nobility, attended the Court in turns as page-companions to the King and his brother, but Louis's favourite playmate was a small girl, the grand-daughter of one of his mother's dressers. She was a lively determined little person, not at all abashed in the presence of a little King. They played at Queens together. She in the title rôle, he in the part of her attendant.

He would bear a candlestick before her, hold up her train, push her in a wheeled chair—her chariot of State—all with tremendous gravity. It was so exciting to pretend to be a servant. Besides Marie-Claire there was always Philip, of course, but Philip's amusements were babyish to the elder child. Moreover unless given his own way in everything, he would fly into tantrums and refuse to play at all. Philip was a great chatterbox. Louis was fond of him, but not interested in his endless make-believe which always centred round himself.

People were always chattering at the Palais Royal. His governess, the tutors, the Queen's women, everyone had plenty to say and said it from morning till night. Occasionally they talked of interesting things like the foal which was born with two heads, the Comet, and the Eastern Magician on the Pont Neuf who could make a tree sprout from the ground at will; but usually they talked about the Parliament's misbehaviour, M. de Retz' misdoings, who was in love with whom, or whether or no Madame de Rochefoucauld should be permitted a stool in the Queen-Regent's drawing-room. Louis let the dull, familiar discussion flow on over his head. He was not a talker himself; there was not much he wanted to talk about.

His mother did not worry much about him. The troubles of the Regency filled her days, and she assured herself that her first duty to her eldest son consisted in preserving the royal authority intact. The man she loved held first place in the heart so long starved. She was never unkind to either of her children. Sometimes she would catch up Philip, her charming little madcap, and give him a dozen kisses and anything he asked for to keep him quiet. She was fond of her first-born also, but there was not always enough of kisses and toys to go round, and Louis was such a reasonable child. The boy knew, there was no time when he had not known that he was first to everyone in name and first to no one in fact. He was not jealous or wounded. He did not formulate the situation; he accepted it—as he accepted his uneasy environment—as his life.

Even after the Court returned from St. Germain to Paris, riding through beflagged streets and fickle applause, his Mother's frequent despondency, her fits of passionate tears, the gravity of the Cardinal's face, the whispering servants, all the deepening anxiety of the Palais Royal did not oppress

him. This fluctuating uneasiness was of every day, no sooner one adult storm over than the next gathered ahead. Enemies and friends changed places like the dancers in a set. Now it was the Prince de Condé—hero of Rocroy and Sens—M. le Prince, the loyal kinsman, the Saviour of France. To-morrow the hero was execrated as an unnatural traitor to his country and his Order. To-day Louis would stand by his mother welcoming Uncle Gaston with open arms, be himself bidden to embrace this kind uncle; he would watch her arrange her own jewels in Cousin Montpensier's wiry red hair, complimenting. Next week the Queen would cry out angrily that should Monsieur, her brother-in-law, have the audacity to present himself, her doors were to be shut in his face. As for Mademoiselle, she would find fishing in troubled waters wouldn't help her land a husband. The child thought this a strange occupation for his tall young lady cousin, but he could learn no more about this curious sport.

The gentlemen of the Parlement had been presumptuous knaves or loyal subjects misled, turn and turn about, ever since he could remember.

These facile transformations might have bewildered Louis, listening or half-listening, had he not at an early age disliked confusion. Determined to keep the house of his mind in order, he classified his relatives as trouble-makers to be avoided whenever possible, the Parlement as a danger—a danger with powers to drive one from home. Thus labelled, he dismissed these problems to the back of his consciousness.

His opinion of the Princes of the Blood Royal was confirmed when Cousins Condé and Conti were arrested and imprisoned at Vincennes by the Regent's orders. The Palais Royal became cheerful. His mother gave a party with presents for everyone, including Philip and himself. The Cardinal was almost gay. At the supper-table he related an interesting story.

Many years ago there had lived a great Emperor, who at death had divided his immense dominions between his three sons. He had intended well, but the unhappy result had been that each had made war on the others and the fine patrimony was split up and devastated. Younger sons, said infallible wisdom, might be given pensions, titles, honours, but never kingdoms. Moreover they should never be permitted to lead armies, not even a great general like M. le Prince. Authority is for the eldest-born alone.

Louis declined to bother his head about Condé, now safely behind lock and key, but he was concerned that while he had been listening to the mistakes of Louis le Debonair, Philip had not only cut the first slice of the fine iced cake, but guided by his mother had found the whereabouts of a *surprise hidden in its succulent depths*. Mazarin, his tale told, remarked the questioning eyes with his own which were full of melancholy.

It was the exile of the Cardinal which first threatened Louis's peace of mind. This misfortune again was the work of those Princes, his uncle and his cousins. Queen Anne lamented aloud that though their best friend had been forced to flee in terror of his life, their enemies, set free, were on the road back to join forces with the rebels of Paris. The boy was too young to discern that the tears in her eyes were tears of anger. Her emotion disturbed him ; a little frightened, he first hated his kinsmen consciously.

For weeks after the Cardinal's departure the children rarely left the Palace. There were fresh faces among the guard. Arguments broke out between the newcomers and the servants. The boy companions disappeared. Several of the ladies attending the Regent's levée stayed away. Uncle Gaston and the Orleans cousins were rare visitors nowadays.

Childhood ended with the unforgettable night.

It began with a discord. His Mother's voice and Uncle Gaston's breaking into his sleep. Disturbing, angry sounds. He turned over and tried to shut them out, but they did not go. He sat up, the sleep still in his eyes. *Whatever was his Uncle doing in his bedroom in outdoor clothes?* His mother was in her dressing-gown, her hair undressed, her face unrouged ; she looked strange as well as pale. He saw she had been crying, and this frightened him.

"What is the matter, Mama?"

The adult antagonists facing each other either side his bed flinging their enmity across it, had no words to spare for him.

"You will perhaps permit me to judge what are the true interests of my nephew, Madame."

"The true interests!"

"I have given my word to the citizens of Paris, Madame."

"You have given your word to a good many people, Sir—myself among them!"

"What is the matter? Oh, do tell me, what is the matter, Mama?"

His uncle answered. Nothing was the matter, but the good people of Paris wanted to see their King. They were good, loyal people. If anyone had told him otherwise he had been deceived. All he had to do was to trust his good people like a little gentleman. Just a few polite words, that was all.

The child could not understand. He looked to his mother for enlightenment and reassurance, but omnipotence had deserted that perturbed face to-night.

She spoke agitatedly. "Oh, no! Impossible, I'll never allow it. To-morrow, perhaps. In the day-time. If only the Cardinal were here! What shall I do, whatever shall I do?" And then left off to cry.

The child grew more frightened. He began to cry as well.

His uncle approached him. At once he sobbed out, "I want my uncle to go away."

This brought down a storm. The Duke of Orleans saw now that his friends had the right of it when they had assured him that his nephew's affections were being estranged from him. Very good, he *would* go. He was going, he washed his hands of it. "We shall see who will be sorry for this," he blustered, striding to the door. He flung out, leaving it wide open; angry ejaculations accompanied his footsteps, quick and hard at first, then dying away down the stone staircase.

Silence followed this outburst. Anne sank into a chair. Laporte, who was there too—it was his place to sleep in the King's room on a folding-bed—Laporte ran to the door and closed it. Returning, speaking hurriedly, he gave his advice to the Queen.

There was no help for it; there was moreover no time to lose: the mob was below. The only possible thing was to appear calm—to satisfy them.

"Only devils would harm the child—there must be fathers and mothers among them. Speak to them as a mother, Madame, without pride or anger. Speak to their hearts!"

Anne looked dazed. Louis heard the valet say, "Madame, I will answer with my life for the King."

She said, "Yes, yes: I confide him to your fidelity."

He was to lie down, be covered up and pretend to be

asleep. There was nothing for him to worry about. Just a few gentlemen to see the King in bed. They tried to make it seem a sort of game, but it was too late ! Danger ! He knew it was close to him ! He saw it as a fierce beast lurking outside the door, waiting to spring. He smelt it. His blood coursed fast and hot ; his heart seemed to be in his throat. For an awful moment he beheld Uncle Charles—a real person !

“Supposing they cut off my head ? Don’t let them come in, please don’t let them come in !” he pleaded.

His mother closed her arms around him, but her power was diminished. Laporte was more successful, his laugh was a comfort.

“Not they, Sir ! A lot of rabbits they are ! Not a sword between them. And what would your good Laporte be doing the while ? You just lie down and let me cover you, warm and tight. You just pretend to be fast asleep. Take no notice of anything. Laporte’s here to take care of you.” He tapped the hilt of his sword and smiled in a confident fashion. “I’d soon give them a taste of this if they started any tricks,” said that comforting smile.

Louis lay down. He suffered his mother to cover him while Laporte removed the lamp to a distance so that it should not shine upon his face. But almost at once he sat up to make sure they were still there. His mother sat in a chair by the bed now. She was tidying her hair. Laporte stood near her ; stood stiff like a sentry. He touched the hilt of his weapon reassuringly, and again the boy lay down.

It began with sounds beyond the door, muffled at first, sharpening into the scraping of many footsteps ascending the stone staircase, swelling into the hubbub of voices. The familiar sound of the opening of the double doors. At once all the noises became much louder. An agitated voice—a servant’s—“Pray gentlemen, come quietly, the King is sleeping.”

There was a partial hush : the voices hushed, not the footsteps, these grew louder, nearer. He thought of them as creeping closer to the refuge of darkness in which he lay. His throat was pulsing unbearably, the warm bed had grown cold, defenceless, as if the covers had fallen off and he lay there with nothing on.

He heard his mother say, “Good evening, gentlemen. You wish to see my son ? He is here, as you see. I am

happy to show him to you." Her words sounded unreal—far away. Several strange voices were speaking together—a medley of sound. Not hostile, rather hesitant, rather abashed. "But yes, Madame, exactly Madame, we see him." One, above the others, "You look, Jacques, that's the little King."

His fear receded a little. He moved his feet very slightly. That throaty breathing seemed very close. Were they coming round the side of the bed? Someone said in a loud nasal whisper, "Don't push, then; there's room for everybody!" A woman's affected enthusiastic, "Oh-h, doesn't he look a little dear?"

"Is that lady the Queen, Mother?"

A wheedling sort of voice: "Don't upset yourself, Madame, we haven't come to hurt anybody."

A fantastic chorus. Not dangerous perhaps—perhaps—but unnatural, grotesque, a nightmare to the heart beating so fast under the feeble defence of closed lids and a blanket or two. It swayed, swelled, diminished, but behind all other sounds always the feet, scraping, dragging, shuffling.

The first hostility came suddenly. A bold laugh. "Who's to say it is the King? 'Twouldn't be the first time they've given us the slip!" Hissing and whispering, "What's that? Hush! Who said that? 'Tisn't him after all? Some kid they put in his bed to suck us? Who is it, then?" A bold voice now. "Can't someone turn those blankets back? We haven't come all this way to look at a lot of bed-clothes!" Laughter. "Here! Out of the way!" A hush—a suspension, a touch felt through the coverlets by his defenceless body.

His fear dissolved in a fury of anger. He was familiar with hardships, restraints, rebuke, but his person had always been held in reverence. It was the first wound, unique in pain, sudden, incredible as a blow in the face. His impulse was to scream but his instinct conquered it. Keep quiet—such an outrage is beyond protest. To protest is to admit. Never for anything in the world would he betray that he had felt that humiliating touch. He clenched his teeth till his ears sang. By force of will he deafened himself to the odious chorus. The Litany of Hate sang in his brain. Uncle Gaston, the traitor; Cousin Condé—another; the Rebel leaders—de Retz, Rochefoucauld, Broussel, names he had often heard vituperated by those around him but never

till now real to him as the names of enemies. They were real enough now. They were traitors who had abandoned him and his mother and Philip (where was poor little Philip?) to this rabble off the streets of Paris.

He had not seen one of the intruders with his eyes, but thenceforth never would he be able to see them for what they actually were. Not for his sight a procession of men and women, poor shabby creatures for the most part, with here and there a well-clad tradesman or a comfortable market-woman. Some few were tipsy, now and again a sullen face, but mostly they entered with excitement, were overawed by the grandeur around them, abashed at the reality. Here were no imperious tyrants, only a mother and her child. But their emotion was unbalanced: it only needed a word, a gesture, to rouse that crowd to tears or violence. Fortunately for Anne, the word was vouchsafed to her. Laporte had stepped forward, his hand was on the man who had dared; the crowd looked ugly. She swept Laporte aside and faced them.

"My friends, I beg you. You have children of your own. Would you like them disturbed from their sleep—frightened? My son is your son, too—the Son of France. I trust you, I *know* you will not alarm him."

A voice, homely, but far more imperious than the Queen's swept to the rescue. "I should think not, indeed! Frighten the little lamb! Now then you—you ought to be ashamed of yourself! Can't you behave? Making a spectacle of yourself like that! Call yourself a man? Hold your tongue, you'll wake him. You get out of here, my man. What's that? Who'll make you—I will for one. I'll soon make you get out of here and double quick, too. Don't you pay any heed to him, Madame, he's tipsy, that's his trouble. I know him. I'm a mother myself, Madame—I've nine of them!"

The women around murmured their approbation. One or two turned on the would-be agitator. Discredited, seeing that the emotion he had been instructed to rouse, to turn to violence, was rushing down the wrong channel, he shambled out, cursing his leaders, not one of whom had risked this sorry expedition.

There were still hundreds outside waiting to file through the Royal bedroom, but the danger was over. No further attempt was made to interfere with the sentiment which lavished itself on the affecting sight of their own little King,

the pretty innocent, watched over by his good mother, fast asleep in his beautiful bed.

Two mothers had saved the Monarchy for a hundred years to come.

But this salvation did not help Louis where he lay alone taut on the rack of his own will. Would they never go away? Would no one ever make them go? Out of his room—the *King's* room—where all ought to be quiet and safe with only Laporte there. The Cardinal—he invoked that protecting figure. “Come back, oh do come back and take care of us!” They had sent him away—he despaired when he remembered how far away.

The voices and the noise were coming close again. He pushed them back with an effort which brought the sweat to his forehead. His eyelids ached and burned. Were his eyes blinking? Under the pillow was his rosary. If he felt for it would they notice his movement? And what if they did notice it? *Let* them! He didn't care. Nobody could make him speak—he bit down his upper lip; no, they never should—never.

“Good night, Madame. That's the little King. He's a fine big lad—what you can see of him! Just look at his bed, Marie, isn't it lovely? Wouldn't you like to sleep in a lovely bed like that?”

Shut it out! They're not there! Push it away till it grows smaller and smaller. One day . . . One day . . .

A clock in the room struck midnight.

The clock striking again. The light was stabbing to his aching eyes. He closed them, but could not shut it out. His mother's head was on his pillow. No, it was Laporte's. A horrible sound filled the room, jarring on his brain: his mother was laughing and crying together.

“Oh, Louis, two o'clock, you poor little darling; you have been wonderful—to keep asleep so long? Two o'clock—more than two hours they've been here!”

Louis did not look at the clock, nor at his mother laughing and crying and shaking, nor at Laporte supporting him to drink the wine he had brought. His eyes, wide and dark, stared at the mud and scratches on the floor. His face went whiter. Without warning he was violently sick.

The Queen was thankful to believe her son had so easily

recovered from the fright of that night. He did not complain, did not lose appetite. The signs he gave were not obvious, and she did not recognize them. He had always been a reserved child. But the effects of the shock were profound; his nature had been hurt to the core, he had been frightened and humiliated beyond his strength. Never could he forget, never forgive that experience. Bury the ugly thing under silence, so deep it can never show its head again.

During the next year of alternating fortune, of Civil war and Spanish war, now virtually a prisoner in the Louvre, now welcomed with enthusiasm in the streets of Paris, he bore the weight of his secret fear and his secret hate. He started at a sudden touch, shrank from noise and crowds, repelled familiarity from those about him. Courtiers spoke of him as a proud, ungracious lad.

His tutors gave him a good character for obedience and application, but added a deferential rider. They would like to see a little more vivacity. In the bosom of his family, M. de Villeroy translated without courtliness, "A commonplace intelligence, I fear."

He had no friends of his age. He was fond of Philip, but the brothers had little in common. The young sprigs of nobility selected by the Regent as companions for her sons were inclined to look down on their Sovereign. They found him childish, dull. Vivonne and young Villeroy, a precocious pair, made game of him, not always in private. The King wasn't sharp enough to see a joke at his own expense, they assured the loyal and indignant Léomenie de Brienne. But even Brienne, a high-spirited youth, midway between Louis and Philip in years, preferred the society of the younger prince. Philip might be a concealed little ape, a tale-bearer if you pricked his vanity, but at least he could be a most amusing companion, whereas an afternoon riding *tête-à-tête* with his Majesty could only be considered a penance.

At length the Cardinal returned from exile and a new life began for Louis. Henceforth he kept the boy of thirteen largely at his side, took him with the armies, included him in the Councils, spoke freely before him of politics and strategy. As soon as might be he prepared for the Coronation, over-riding official objections of the emptiness of the Treasury. It should have been done a year ago, he told them. As for expense, there could be no better investment.

He was fifteen when they crowned him. That unforgettable day Louis heard a voice which restored him to his place. It drowned those raucous voices of the Paris mob. Order, seemliness, obliterated the foulness on the floor. The Holy Chrism wiped out that profane touch through the coverlets. He was healed although the scar remained. The boy could remember the outrage and not shudder. He thought of it in terms of the Archbishop's exhortation. "Lord and Master." Answerable to God alone. "For thine is the Kingdom"—and the Power and the Glory will come—they shall come.

He thought this now with confidence and patience, riding with his head up, singing to himself, riding happily through the valleys of Lorraine.

CHAPTER II

"Vous m'aimez—vous êtes Roi—je pars."

Maria Mancini to Louis XIV, 1661.

1655-1661

If the Cardinal had little affection to bestow, it was not for lack of legitimate objects for tenderness. His kinsfolk were legion. In the early days of his career he had sent modest but regular remittances to Rome where two widowed sisters, mothers of large families, existed on inadequate pensions and their wits. Later when his increasing fortunes warranted the outlay, it occurred to him that well-established relatives would be an asset and that some of the gentlemen of France might be found willing to relieve him of the liability for half a dozen nieces. He began cautiously, sending for a couple of the elder girls and a promising nephew.

He began too soon. Victoria Mancini's betrothal to the Duc de Mercœur in 1651 almost coincided with her Uncle's fall from power. Happily, the Duke was genuinely enamoured of his fifteen-year-old fiancée and, undeterred by her guardian's disgrace, followed the Mazarins to their exile in Bhûrl where he married the girl out of hand. This loyalty stood him in good stead two years later when the Cardinal was back in power, and the rebel Princes crawling in one after

the other, all eager to propitiate the upstart politician they detested.

There was plenty of clearing up to do at home after his return, to say nothing of the Spanish to be chased from two frontiers, but Mazarin's appetite for government was enormous, diplomacy was to him as the breath of life. For years he worked a twelve-hour day, but in the midst of all these activities he found leisure to send for the rest of his relations.

In due course the Signoras Mancini and Martinozzi, one with a bevy of four young daughters and a son, the other with but one of each, arrived in Paris. The benefactor uncle established them in good quarters furnished from the superfluity of the Palais Mazarin, allowed his sisters rather less than was required to maintain the position he prescribed, rated them for extravagance if they ran into debt, and above all impressed upon them the importance of obeying his directions in the paramount business of marrying off their girls early and well. He had undertaken to make their fortunes, and he set about it in masterly fashion.

They were a set of sprightly creatures, ranging from six years to eighteen; most of them were pretty—Hortense bade fair to be a beauty—and all had their wits about them. Their mothers taught them to chatter in French, to dress their own hair and to strum on the guitar. Their uncle packed them off to high-class convent boarding-schools, whence they emerged, one after the other according to age, elegant young ladies of quality, perfect in their French and their curtsies. Two of them sang prettily, Olympe had the carriage of a Queen, and Marianne, the youngest, could say her Catechism backwards and write the most amusing doggerel, mocking the good Sisters and everyone else. One and all, they regarded their accomplishments as weapons for the great struggle of life: the capture of a rich husband. To a girl they professed undying affection for their dear uncle, and not one of them, not even little Marianne, had any illusions as to the nature of his benevolence.

In due course His Eminence presented his nieces at Court. Queen Anne was charmed with the modest dark-eyed maidens. Olympe and Anne were so gay and amusing, yet quite unspoiled. Her Majesty thought they would be pleasant company for her sons. They were just what was needed: the two or three young ladies in the Royal Family

circle—Mlles d'Orléans and the Vendômes—were dull plain girls, little exile Henrietta Stuart almost a baby, and one had to be so careful with the daughters of the nobility (girls were so artful and her boys so young and so innocent). The dear Cardinal's nieces were on a plane by themselves, so sensibly brought up (Her Majesty recalled how well Victoria de Mercœur had turned out). Yes, these grateful protégées would provide Louis and Philip with an opportune introduction to young feminine society, whilst they could be trusted to keep their place.

So the Demoiselles Mancini and Martinozzi were made free of the Palais Royal and had a great success. Philip, and Louis too, in the intervals of campaigning, took pleasure in their company. They introduced Italian frivolities, diffidently at first, into that Court of stiff Spanish tradition. No party at the Palace was complete without them. The young people, all in their 'teens, got up ballets, sang in concerts, went masked and indulgently chaperoned to St. Germain's Fair, and danced their shoes out nearly every evening. Behind his mother's back Philip indulged in horse-play with Marianne, while Olympe, the conscious beauty of the Mancinis, taught Louis to play on her guitar.

These were memorable evenings. Everyone danced or sang or acted. Everyone was a success. Other young people were invited to these delightful parties. Henriette, the poor little Stuart exile, thin as a rake and only eight years old, was an occasional guest. Good manners insisted that the King should open the ball with this Cinderella of Princesses, but Louis had set his heart on the regal Olympe for partner, and his sulkiness on this occasion gave his mother her first prick of misgiving on account of his Eminence's nieces.

A word from her uncle soon set Mademoiselle Olympe to rights—besides she was due to marry shortly the Comte de Soissons, a wonderful match for a girl of her quality.

The gaiety at the Palais Royal went on uninterruptedly; the younger girls were brought from school now—charming Hortense and Marie, third and plainest of the Mancinis. Her mother despaired of her. She had wanted to leave her in her Convent, the difficult sulky girl, no one would look at her twice with her face and her manner, besides she might be a drawback to the other girls. But His Eminence decreed otherwise.

"My ugly niece, Madame," said the Minister humorously.

Queen Anne saw a thin sullen face, a snub nose and a pair of angry dark young eyes. She felt sorry for the child.

"Nonsense, Monseigneur, one is never plain with such eyes! Wait a year or two!" And to console the débutante for her mortification she beckoned to her elder son and invited him to lead Mademoiselle Marie out in the Coranto.

Louis, wrenched from the side of her elder sister, was anything but pleased.

"Another child!" he muttered to himself.

But she did not dance like a child. She swayed and bent and twirled like an expert, and she looked at him like a sulky silent Fury.

At the end of several well-meant attempts to draw her out he said, "You're not very communicative, Mademoiselle."

She almost hissed. "I hate French—the ugly twisting tongue—and everything French too!" Straightway she burst into a torrent of Italian. He caught one word only—her uncle's name.

"What on earth is all that about?"

She continued to tread out the measure of the dance. Slowly, as if keeping time to the music, she chanted, "The Cardinal Mazarin is a cruel, selfish beast. I hate him and I hate everybody in the world!"

He burst out laughing. "You're a queer child."

"I'm not a child, I'm fifteen!"

"I beg your pardon. Pray tell me why you hate everyone."

She said vehemently, "I hate you, too!"

He bent to the angry young face. "Why, what have I done to offend you, Mademoiselle Marie?"

"Made me dance when you know I don't want to, and you want to be with my sister—oh, I know all about it!"

"I assure you, I'm delighted to dance with you, you dance beautifully," he said placatingly.

She refused to be mollified.

"I can dance much finer than this, let me tell you. But not with anyone who doesn't know the steps properly. I can dance much better than anyone in the whole room—none of my sisters can touch me!"

By the end of the Coranto he found this spitfire entertaining. He asked her for a Contredanse, and this time succeeded in smoothing her into a better humour. He

learned she was the outcast of the family ; that they all wanted her to take the veil, but she never, never would ; that she could sing, dance and play, always much better than her sisters ; that she had fluent Spanish besides French ; that, as she had said, she detested France and all things French and never would she look at a Frenchman !

After this she rapidly made friends with the young King of France, and when she offered to teach him Italian he took it seriously.

"I expect you'd prefer to learn Spanish ? " she said with a sharp, birdlike glance.

"Whichever you prefer," he replied, with the mock humility she seemed to take as a right.

"I'll teach you my language—the Infanta can give you your lessons in Spanish—on your honeymoon !"

He was amused by this saucy reference to his cousin in Madrid.

"Don't be jealous," he teased her ; "I'll wait for you instead."

She made a grimace.

Queen Anne consenting, he and Philip visited frequently at her mother's house that winter, but next year both lads forgot all about the Cardinal's nieces in the excitement of taking part in the campaign against the Spanish in East Flanders.

This was life ! War, if only a siege or two. Fine fun to be had racing their horses on the flats around Dunkirk.

But Louis overdid it. He tired himself out, spending whole days in the saddle, and there was pestilence among the troops with bodies lying unburied for days on the beaches. Moreover, his enthusiasm received a check when, in conformance with the terms of the Alliance, the victorious French must hand over the newly-taken Dunkirk to Cromwell's Commander. The self-contained lad turned sulky, refused to spend the night in the surrendered town and rode off to Calais, tears smarting in his eyes.

"I am not interested in Dunkirk," he snubbed the would-be sympathetic Brienne, whilst trying to console himself with the resolve that come what might he'd get that town back from the insolent English one day. The next day he was obviously unwell, a high fever followed, and Mazarin, despair in his heart for once, was obliged to recognize the gravity of his condition. He sent for his Confessor and the

Last Sacraments were administered, after which the royal sickroom was deserted by the Court in favour of the apartment where Philip, in unfeigned grief, sat weeping for his brother.

A humble local doctor saved the patient's life at the last moment. He pushed aside the royal physicians, forbade bleeding and emetics and cured the boy, so he declared, with his home-made herbal potion which had never been known to fail.

Louis's convalescence was rapid. At the end of a few days he was cracking jokes with Philip over the latter's picture of courtiers scurrying to the younger brother as to the Rising Sun.

"You should have seen that Mancini girl, Lou—Marie, I mean. She came rushing up in a post-chaise—a broken down affair—without leave from anyone. No one knows how she managed it. She was tearing that wild black hair of hers out in handfuls, and she just glued herself to the outside of your door. She was the only courtier you had left, Louis, when they swore your last hour had come!"

"What's that?" said the elder brother.

He soon discovered what it was. At their next meeting he made light of his illness. She burst into tears.

"Don't dare to make game of it. You nearly died! If you had died I should have killed myself!" She went on sobbing.

So he entered upon first love. He invested the passionate dark-eyed Italian with all the beauties of the ideal. She was lovely, generous, noble of soul, and she loved him for himself alone. His spirit sang with elation at the thought that he, the man—not the King—stood first in another's heart.

She blossomed beneath the warmth of his adoration. Her face grew softer, her voice gentle; he found her eyes could languish as well as flash. From the outset she took the lead in the affair. Far more impatient, quicker-witted than he, she arranged meetings and notes, the bribing of servants, the duping of her governess. She was three years the younger, but in worldly wisdom twice his age. To Louis, at twenty, the meetings at social gatherings, the dances where their hands encountered, secret moments snatched in moonlit gardens, above all the stream of love letters, were delights sufficient.

But Marie's black eyes gazed afar. She began to urge her slower lover. Why must their meetings be stolen? Subterfuge spoiled their perfect love. The real shame lay in their fear of the Queen-Mother and of the Cardinal, and why should he fear any? Was he not the King? "For me it is different," she would sigh with the new humility which went to his heart. "I'm nobody. If they decide to marry me to-morrow, I am helpless to prevent it. To-day they were speaking of the Prince Colonna."

This terrible prospect startled him. During these blissful months he had easily been able to put the project of his own state marriage with the Infanta out of his mind. A remote catastrophe. Why, the Peace with Spain was not yet agreed, much less signed, and everyone was always saying how dilatory and half-hearted the Spanish were. Let his mother and his Minister ramble on about the charming young Marie-Thérèse and the inestimable advantages of such an alliance, Franco-Spanish marriages were not always such wonderful affairs, as his mother should be the first to remember. If it came to a battle of wills, neither of them could compel him to marry. Besides, nothing was definite. Mazarin had even brought forward the name of another royal Cousin—Marguerite of Savoy; a second string no doubt, but all the same they were arranging for him to meet her at Lyons. The Cardinal was only using the wretched girl as a spur to Spain, rather humiliating for her to be paraded as a mare at a fair, but it all meant delay and a journey to Lyons would be pleasant with Marie, a member of the Queen's household, in the company.

They had been careful and the intimacy between the Palais Royal and the Palais Mazarin helping, the affair had aroused little comment in its early days. But the eyes of the Mancini sisters were keen. Before long Olympe woke to jealousy. Grown-up and married, with a fine establishment and a host of admirers, she had no use emotionally for Louis, whom she regarded as a dull overgrown boy. But she understood her sister, and no ambition on her part would have surprised her. Queen or Royal Mistress, either was the most dazzling fortune woman could attain, and the idea that the despised Marie should climb higher than herself, the acknowledged beauty, was insupportable.

She set herself to wreck this preposterous ambition.

The Cardinal listened, but all the venomous young woman

got for her pains was a stern command to hold her tongue and mind her own business.

Nevertheless he watched the pair during the journey to Lyons, and it was not necessary to take much trouble to be convinced that Olympe had not exaggerated. The informality of the long trip—it took three months—gave endless opportunities to the lovers. They lost their heads in Lyons : wandered arm-in-arm round the Place Belle-Cœur by moonlight, went riding together before breakfast in the soft golden sunshine of October mornings, openly and for all the world to see. The Mancini governess ran to His Eminence, wringing her hands, but her employer took it calmly and told her not to appear to notice anything unusual, but to make sure that her youngest charge, Marianne, shared her sister's bedroom.

Encouraged by the failure of the Savoy negotiations and still more by the apparent complaisance of the Cardinal and the Queen-Mother, Louis paid his court openly and daily, and even the less optimistic Marie began to count on an easy victory.

But once returned to Paris the storm broke.

His Eminence sent for his niece. She obeyed in fear and trembling, but determined to hold her own. She encountered a benevolent uncle with only the interests of his orphaned niece at heart. Not a word of rebuke for outrageous behaviour on the royal journey ; not a word about Louis at all. His Eminence had splendid news for his little Marie ; it concerned the Prince Colonna ; a formal offer for her hand from the first nobleman in Rome ! A magnificent establishment, and her loving uncle would give her a really generous dowry. The negotiations might take a few months ; meanwhile the dear child was looking pale, the long travelling had tired everybody and she was in need of a change. A few weeks' quiet retreat by the sea would do her all the good in the world. He had arranged for her to go to La Rochelle with two of her sisters for company and good Mme de Venelle to look after the little party.

The girl did not weep or protest or even show surprise. She played her part as well as he. Discretion for the moment. She thanked His Eminence for his interest in her humble future and walked out with an air of complete composure.

But she descended on Louis like a whirlwind. Her hour had struck ! Their happiness was at an end : they were

going to marry her, they were going to exile her. He alone could prevent it ; he must act at once !

Eyes shining through a flood of tears, she threw herself on the young man's breast.

" Louis, darling Louis—don't let them send me away ! "

He caressed her lustrous black hair. " Darling, don't be so distressed. No one shall marry you but I ! "

Her face was hidden but her heart leapt in triumph. Never before had he spoken of marriage, never for one moment had she considered anything less. She had got the blessed word she had been struggling for all these months. For one moment she gave herself up to sheer exultation. Then came the fear of his simplicity, his lack of enterprise. She must strike now, while the iron was hot ; his mother might prevail on him this very night. As they sat side by side in the little room which was her chambermaid's, she did her utmost to infect him with her own indomitable spirit. Nothing could be lost if only he stood firm. It lay with him. An uncle, a mother, what could they do against him ? The King is the King.

" I die when I only think of that wretch Colonna—if he were but to kiss me my flesh would creep ! "

She strained her arms round him, she gave him her first real kiss, long and passionate. It turned his head. He vowed he would speak to the Cardinal that very evening. She began to advise him how to approach. He must take her uncle without warning. " He'll tell you it's too late—you must marry your cousin ; he'll tell you I'm nothing but a greedy adventuress ; he'll tell you you'll break your mother's heart."

He listened to all of it gravely, saying little, only at the end assuring his sweetheart that she could rely on him ; he would never give her up.

" I don't think it will be mighty difficult," he ended cheerfully.

But once out of her dominating presence, his assurance diminished. By the time he was ready to set out for the Palais Mazarin he was dreading the forthcoming ordeal. He had never withstood the Cardinal in his life, and his mother but rarely. Of her he had no real fear, though he shrank from her emotion. The Minister he held in awe. That suave, omniscient man who foresaw everything, dealt with everything, was never perturbed, succeeded ultimately

in everything he undertook. He was bound to Mazarin by dependence even more than by gratitude ; and he *was* grateful. He was never at ease when hearing Marie vilify her uncle. It was impossible for him to forget what the Cardinal had endured in the Royal cause : years of public obloquy, exile, ceaseless hard work and even at times the risk of his life. Impossible to ignore the fact that he had stood for years for his own and his mother's ultimate protector. If he would not consent how could he be compelled ? But then why *should* he refuse ? He might be disappointed at the failure of the Spanish marriage—but surely when he came to think it over he would be flattered to have his niece for Queen of France. He ought to take it as the crown of his career.

He began to envisage probable objections. Marry beneath him ? Except for a cousin or two he must inevitably marry beneath him. Had not his grandfather's wife been a nobody, for that matter ? Though even to speak of the fat ugly old Marie de Medicis in the same breath with his slender adorable love was sacrilege. Mazarin was certain to make a lot of the darling wish of his mother's heart—her niece, that miserable Marie-Thérèse. Her pictures showed a doll-like creature with stiff flaxen ringlets and round astonished blue eyes. Philip had heard someone say that the Infanta had never spoken to a man in her life except her Royal Father—he had been ribald on the subject. Good God ! Fancy spending one's whole life by the side of such a puppet !

Louis rose and went to the window. Six o'clock and coming on to rain. A windy January evening, but not cold. He ought to start now. Crossing the courtyard of the Palais Royal, a single attendant following, he told himself that it was only a matter of keeping firm and he would soon be coming back, racing back, to tell his Marie he had arranged everything and hear her say how wonderful he was, and how she loved him. He recalled that warm ardent mouth, and the colour rose in his cheeks.

His Eminence, he was informed at the door, was indisposed, had passed a restless night, but he would be honoured to receive the King.

Certainly he looked far from well, this invalid wrapped in a shabby dark red dressing-gown, one foot in a fur-lined slipper, the other shapeless in bandages stretched out on a

footstool. His face was yellow with smears of dark brown beneath the bloodshot eyes. The swollen hands were shaking as he rose stiffly with the aid of a stick. The young man felt at once that this sickness placed him at a disadvantage. Marie had said nothing of illness—she must have been too upset to remark it. He took a seat on the other side of a small table placed by the Cardinal's arm-chair. It held some papers, neatly stacked, a bottle of physic, a silver cup and a species of miniature brazier which gave out a pungent, medicinal smell.

The long room was crowded with heavy ornate furniture, statues in marble and bronze and ornaments of every variety. The effect was that of an ill-kept museum. By the huge fireplace a couple of long-haired cats slept in a basket back to back, watched from a perch above by a small monkey on a chain who regarded them with a sad anxious expression while nibbling at a nut. The floor beneath the perch was a litter of shells. Another cat, a monstrous decrepit Persian, washed its mangy grey fur under the table, and at the end of the room a small aviary of tiny brightly-coloured birds kept up a nervous persistent twitter.

The room, though large, was very hot and sour with the smell of animals, medicine and sick humanity. Louis, to whom fresh air was a necessity, was nauseated. Great Heavens, how revolting ! Not for the first time he wondered how Mazarin, a man of culture, could exist in such an atmosphere. It seemed worse than usual—hotter—and coming in out of the cool rain-swept evening he felt it was more than he could bear. He would make a few decent inquiries after the Minister's health and leave things till to-morrow ; but the thought of his sad Marie anxiously awaiting his return, forbade such an unworthy retreat. Still, the ordinary courtesies would make a beginning.

"I am deeply concerned, Monseigneur . . ."

Mazarin, almost recumbent among his cushions, his hands lying slackly alongside the arms of the chair, his pose one of exhausted resignation, murmured his gratification at receiving this visit from his Sovereign. Yes, he must confess he was not quite himself. A trifle fatigued—nothing much. The Queen had done him the honour to hold him company that afternoon ; Mademoiselle had looked in ; Prince Philip had accompanied her and remained an hour or two—"My little monkey amused him greatly !" Yes, so many kind

visitors might have tired him a little, but he was inexpressibly touched by the thought that these attentions shown by persons of such quality were offered expressly to comfort an unfortunate old invalid. A long life had taught him that disinterested sympathy was of all things the most beautiful—and the most rare!

Louis felt more uncomfortable than ever. This culminating visit to the sufferer took on an inconsiderate aspect. He reconsidered retreat and again the vision of another Mazarin, dark, passionate and beloved, held him to his task.

"I fear you will scarcely be equal to giving me a few moments to discuss a matter of importance."

The Cardinal took up a handkerchief from the table and wiped his face. It was a fragile trifle, lace-edged. Louis recognized it as his mother's. Watching the invalid using it as his own, he experienced another sense of discomfiture. He had grown up a witness of their strange relationship, and though always in ignorance of its true nature he was not ignorant of the scandalous criticism it had evoked. In times past it had made him jealous, but only with the resentment of a child at the display of his mother's preference for another. Of late years the sight of her staid affection which might easily be the expression of tried friendship or the outcome of years of satisfying marriage, had ceased to irk him. Mazarin as one of the family, living in the Palais Royal, accompanying them everywhere, was part of his life, the order of things. No one, except once Philip, had ever ventured to address him on the subject. Now while the invalid wiped his face, he recalled in a sudden flash the disgusting doggerel with its scandalous reflection upon his own parentage which his brother had carried about all day in his pocket before displaying it to him. As he sat there he could see again the paper crumbling to ash in the candle flame in which he had held it whilst warding off Philip and his furious protestations. They had come to blows over that. But afterwards he had easily been able to put it out of mind again. His mother was his mother; the Minister had deserved well of them both: he would not permit himself imagination of anything to their discredit.

Now, at sight of her delicate handkerchief—its office to wipe the sweat from that unhealthy face—the antipathy of youth in love for age in love rose in him. He saw his mother, not the woman in her still pleasing comeliness, but that

ageless being *his Mother*, his flesh and blood, hanging over this decrepit old man in this stifling room of decaying odours. What had they to do with love? How dare he flaunt her handkerchief?

He was moved to say sharply, "I came to speak with you on an urgent matter."

The Cardinal put down the square of lawn and lace, folded it neatly and replaced it. Louis averted his eyes from the table and plunged desperately.

"I wish to ask a favour." A weak beginning, he hurried away from it. "I have come to request—to ask—the hand of Mlle Marie Mancini—I come to you as her guardian."

He only hoped the rider expressed, "Yes, I recognize your authority over *her*—not over myself": and looked squarely at Mazarin with what he trusted was an expression of unalterable determination.

The Minister's face showed no surprise. "For whom, Sir?"

"For whom?"

The quiet respectful voice explained. "On whom does your Majesty graciously desire to confer my niece?"

Such a misapprehension was intolerable. Louis said stiffly, "I regret I did not make it clear that I myself wish to marry Mlle Mancini."

The Cardinal said even more respectfully, "I ask your Majesty's pardon for my error," and waited, eyes veiled, the profile rigid and yellow as if carved from old ivory, reminding the agitated young man of that of a confessor awaiting the revelations of a kneeling penitent.

Before this imperturbable mask he felt helpless and humiliated. Only by a show of assertion could he extricate himself.

"Will you kindly give me your answer, Monseigneur?"

The Cardinal lifted his eyes to the hot young face. "You must forgive me, Sir, I am taken aback, I am overwhelmed. You have doubtless had this matter in mind for long past, to me it comes as a complete surprise."

His hand sought for the handkerchief, he crumpled it as it lay.

Louis said boldly, "I should not have thought it, Monseigneur, bearing in mind your interview with Marie to-day!"

He had the satisfaction of seeing that the Cardinal was looking embarrassed, yes, unmistakably embarrassed.

"I owe you a humble apology, Sir, for—for my complete misapprehension of the facts. I confess I had resolved on sending my niece to a distance from Paris because of a situation which might prove injurious to her good name. Your Majesty in removing my misapprehension has increased my astonishment!"

Answering the bewilderment of the other's face, he added: "I knew, of course—who does not?—that the King favoured my young niece. I could not—in my wildest dreams—imagine that he desired to make her Queen of France!"

This was insupportable.

"Are you implying that you hold a low opinion of my honour, Monseigneur?"

At this outburst the Minister changed his expression and even his attitude in the chair. His shoulders lifted, his fingers shifted slightly, he looked humble, deprecating, as Louis hurried on indignantly, "I must beg you to understand that I esteem Mademoiselle Marie above everyone in the world. There is no one more worthy to be Queen of France!"

The languid head bowed itself to the chest, a hand crept up to the support of the forehead, a thin murmuring, "I am deeply conscious of the honour your Majesty does my poor House," and the invincible potent Minister appeared to have withdrawn, leaving to his King the contemplation of a poor defective body and the back of a long white hand below a little red skull-cap.

Before this attitude of abnegation and dejection Louis felt himself checked. He could think of nothing better than to repeat the object of his errand:

"May I have your answer, Monseigneur?"

As if returning from both space and time, the Cardinal slowly removed his hand from his forehead to his chin, and yielded him a look of resignation.

"If you would accord me a little time, Sir, for reflection. It is an important matter—but I will give it urgent consideration. May we say a month?"

"I was hoping for to-night, your Eminence. Surely it is not so difficult?"

"There *are* difficulties in the marriage of a King," admitted the Cardinal gently. This was more tangible; one had something to go on here.

"Of course there are difficulties," Louis spoke with an

assumption of cheerfulness. "I appreciate that, naturally. You are thinking of my mother's attitude—her probable attitude, that is—and of how Spain will take it."

Mazarin removed his hand from his chin and nodded his head. "True, most true. There will beyond a doubt be trouble with her Majesty—and with Spain."

Louis felt easier. "I should hope I do not have to ask the King of Spain's permission to marry!"

Mazarin gave the ghost of a laugh; a reedy, dutiful merriment. "Preposterous, Sir! Your Majesty is of age. Your will is law. I confess I do not rank the disapproval of your august mother or that of your late enemies as being the most serious of your difficulties. They are in fact the least, save of course the effect your proposed marriage will have on my own position. *That* is the least consideration of all. I merely allude to it that the—the picture—may be complete. Unnecessary, no doubt, since your Majesty will have already regarded the matter from all aspects. I do not expect that my humble position should weigh with you. I do not ask it for a moment. You will have anticipated my resignation and considered the measures you will take for your future Government."

He turned in his seat to open a box of cough pastilles and to regard the visitor's face.

"What do you mean—your resignation? Why should you resign?"

The Cardinal coughed. "Is it really necessary to enumerate the reasons, Sir? This is a little painful for me—one has one's weaknesses—after twenty years!"

"It is unnecessary to talk about resignation. I won't listen to it."

The Cardinal coughed again.

"Sire, it will be unavoidable. I have my enemies. You, I know, do me the justice to recognize that I have had but these aims in my long service: first the security and now the glory of your throne. But others are not so just. The malcontents who have submitted to you still hate me. Hate is the only word. To them I am always the unscrupulous adventurer, the low-born Italian. What a triumph for the Princes of your blood, Sir, who alleged my disastrous influence as the prime excuse for their rebellion, to parade this crowning evidence of my treasonable ambition! Why, they could arouse another Civil War with such a battle-

cry !” He ended, reflectively stroking his chin, “ Another Fronde*, not a doubt of it !”

Louis was silent. He stared down at the basket by the fire, at the comfortable, curled creatures within. This was a new difficulty. How many more had the old man got up his sleeve ? He waited, but the weary voice only faltered, “ I care nothing for myself, I am near the end in any event. I shall resign at once—in your Majesty’s interests.”

Louis got up and began to pace the room. He must move from the fire or suffocate. Over by that miserable aviary it was at least cooler. But the Cardinal’s cough began to trouble him again. His hand groped for his medicine ; a paroxysm shook him : the drug spilled. Louis, with genuine solicitude, came over to him, took the phial from the shaking hand and kneeling at the table carefully measured the dose. The invalid took a sip and motioned it away. Between gasps he intimated that a mere taste of the miraculous elixir was sufficient. He was better already. No, he did not require his valet. Only a catch in the throat—a nervous affection. . . .

Louis bent over him, replacing the rugs round his knees.

“ Listen, Monseigneur, I’ll leave you now. On my soul I regret to have distressed you. I’ll go now and we’ll discuss it later—when you’re better. Pray don’t give another thought to resignation—what on God’s earth should I do without you ? ”

The sick man, lying back comfortably now, had a wistful smile for this. “ You’ll have to do without me before long, Sir, and I make no doubt you will manage very well indeed. But I do beg of you, sit down again. It would distress me beyond measure if you left me now : I should worry over this all night.”

Louis resumed his seat, pushing it further from the fire. His eyes lifted to a clock. Ten ! He had been here nearly an hour already !

“ If you wish it, Monseigneur, but won’t you tell me that I have your consent ? That is the principal thing. We can go into the difficulties afterwards. We can overcome them all, I am persuaded, if we work together.” A sudden, winning smile—his first—lightened the serious young face.

* The name given to the Civil War of Louis’ childhood.

"When I recall what mighty obstacles you have conquered I have no misgivings at all!"

The Minister returned the disarming smile with one of melancholy and indulgence. "Sir, if I am to advise you I must have your entire confidence. May I ask you to enlighten me on one point not yet clear to me? How long is it since you decided to marry my niece?"

He saw the smile fade into discomfiture, but the answer came frankly.

"I only decided—actually decided—to-day, but we have loved each other a long time."

Mazarin preserved a perfect gravity. "Admirable—in a private person. Unfortunately, Your Majesty's marriage is an affair of State. It's first function, after providing for the succession, should be to strengthen your Throne."

"Well, Monseigneur, I have given considerable thought to some of these State marriages in the past, and I've yet to learn that union with Spain has proved so mighty beneficial. Either they don't pay the dowry and bad feelings start, or else there's a lot of suspicion of the foreign Queen. My mother should know that," he ended, flushing up. "For my part, I look to find peace in the marriage I shall make."

Mazarin made a delicate gesture, as if to wave aside an unfortunate remark.

"Her Majesty was very young when she came to France and most unfortunate," he said with gentlemanly rebuke. "She possessed every quality to make her husband happy. But if it is peace you seek in a *mésalliance*, Sir, I fear you will be grievously disappointed. As your First Minister it is my bounden duty to advise you to the best of my ability. In my view"—he joined his finger-tips and scrutinized them intently—"in my view, such a marriage will cost you your Throne. Of course I may be mistaken: it might be as well if your Majesty took other advice."

"Surely you are taking an extreme view, Monseigneur? I do not agree with you."

All the same he was perturbed. Mazarin saw that in a quick sidelong glance. He resumed very quietly:

"France has barely recovered from civil war—a war which, as you know, has wasted and weakened her for ten years first to last. The Crown had survived it by a miracle. There have been times when I deemed it lost—as in England

it is lost. Your Majesty was too young to appreciate how grave was the danger in the earlier days, though no doubt you can remember something of the excesses in Paris. The abominable attacks on your Royal Mother ; the pamphlets—the placards—the assault on the Palais Royal.”

“ I assure you I have forgotten nothing ! ”

Mazarin gave him another look.

“ Reprehensible—most reprehensible. But when were the common people not sheep in the hands of sharp-witted leaders ? The mob only followed M. de Retz, the Prince de Condé, or your Royal Uncle—anyone clever enough to work on their grievances and play on their imagination. At heart your people were and are loyal to the Crown. The rebel leaders found them an easy prey because they were able to persuade them that all ills came from the misgovernment of two foreigners : a Spanish regent and her Italian favourite. The French have no love for alien rulers, but they would welcome ”—here a note of feeling warmed the dry voice—“ they would adore their own Prince, a strong man, a Frenchman like themselves. Ordinary men only crave for peace and security in which to labour—you can give them these and more, and your time is so nearly ripe. You are the King so long awaited. I have toiled only for this : to make your advent favourable. But you cannot succeed, no man could succeed, hampered from the outset by the ceaseless jealous hostility of all the chief forces in the land. You have spoken of your mother—have you given a thought to how the Prince your brother would take such a marriage ? ”

Louis said wearily, “ I’ve no doubt there would be trouble all round.”

As he spoke the big Persian cat walked slowly and with much dignity from beneath the table, hesitated a moment and then sprang on its master’s lap. Mazarin caressed it into repose, continuing as he stroked the long shabby hair :

“ I have a profound affection for Prince Philip ; his heart is of the best, but, if I may say so, his head is none of the strongest. I speak frankly, I can imagine him smarting under the affront he would see in your choice of a Queen, flattered into becoming the figurehead of an Opposition. Even your own mother—the Princes—the Church—the Nobility—I warn you from my long experience of all of them—not one would submit to seeing Marie Mancini, niece of the upstart

Italian, elevated over their heads to the Throne of France." He added as if tossing down a few inconsiderable words, "They'd prefer to tear down the Throne!"

The young man, impressed in spite of himself, irritated by the picture thus evoked, by the casual voice, by the very sight and sound of the purring animal, scraped back his chair and struck his hand on his knee.

"I will suffer no one of them to intimidate me!"

The Cardinal bowed his head. "Very good, Sir. If you feel yourself strong enough to risk these dangers—you are a brave man. I dare not risk them for you, nor in your name. I am but your servant and a foreigner, but before I would loose such havoc on your France I would kill my niece and myself with her."

There was no threat in the voice, only despair, but Louis looked up startled. "That would be murder!"

"A murder which would save thousands of lives. Forgive my loss of self-control," he went on after a moment's pause, "but when I think of what your reign could be—should be—an epoch of glory for France and for yourself, it is more than I can bear."

He pushed the cat from his knees and bending forward began for the first time to speak with excitement, the hint of a foreign accent betraying itself in the increasing rapidity of the utterance. "I know! I have watched you! Always have I watched you! You say little but you think, and you have it in your mind to be great! You have all the gifts: birth, health, patience, resolution. The Gods have even given you the face and bearing of a King. Everything! I have it in me no less, but the Fates were all against me. A trader's son, my grandfather a Jew of Naples, did you know that?—unpopular, this miserable diseased body"—he clutched at the breast of the soiled dressing-gown—"and in spite of all I have ruled for twenty years as my Sovereign's deputy and saved his throne and cleared his footpath. I have loved my hard ungrateful task, but had I been in truth a King . . . Ah! All for nothing, all in vain, since I am come to sit here, an impotent old man, and hearken to my young Master planning to wreck my life work and his whole life with it!"

The passion was extinguished as suddenly as it had blazed up; the dramatic figure collapsed and shivered.

Louis, shrinking from the hysteria he had never before

witnessed in the self-contained Minister, but nevertheless impressed by its very strangeness, spoke uneasily :

"You go too far. You only see one side : the difficulties. There is another side you do not see. I have gone too far to retreat. I have given my word to this lady." He waited for another outburst. It did not come. The invalid among the pillows only made the slightest motion of a shrug.

"I have given my word," he repeated.

"Oh, Sir, I'll say no more. I might remind you that you gave your word to France, years ago, in the Cathedral at Rheims, but to what end ? All men break oaths when it pleases them !"

A silence fell, the logs settled in the hearth, the tiny spiral of blue smoke from the brazier writhed upwards, the cats—first one then the other—stretched themselves, yawning, in their bed. The little monkey emitted a plaintive squeal at the movement below his perch. The clocks ticked on. Mazarin closed his eyes and Louis with a sigh moved heavily in his seat. He was no longer resentful of this opposition. In spite of its extravagance the Cardinal's passion had moved him. He recognized its sincerity, the fineness of this single purpose, and his reason told him that he had overlooked much in his haste. Nevertheless he felt that Mazarin, for all his keen vision, was blind to the other aspect : the hope, the joy, the inspiration to endeavour which belonged to the love he belittled. He was encouraged by a touch of pride. It was he, the pupil in statecraft, the novice in love, who was broadminded enough to appreciate both sides. He would try to make Mazarin see the other.

"Do not forget my heart is in this. I will endure much, overcome much, to attain this happiness."

Mazarin said gently, "And are you ready to lose much ?" He went on with the accent of weariness, "You must judge for yourself ; all men must judge for themselves in the last event. If this young girl means more to you than your country, your kingship—yourself—if you sincerely believe she will compensate you—not merely now but in all the years to come for the loss of all else—I can only give you my last advice—the advice of a faithful servant who loves both you and France : *Abdicate !*"

The watchful eyes saw first incredulity and then indignation, then the fading of these into a more complex expression. It was not a smile, though the full lips curved ; it

was not disdain though there was pride in it and something of derision. It was the look of one embittered who can yet afford to laugh because of a secret joy. His face retained the shadow of that look when he turned it to the Cardinal.

"I know you speak in what you consider my best interests," he said; "I trust I have not fatigued you too much. I will bid you good night now."

He did not offer his hand nor wait for a reply.

After the King strode out absent-faced, not even acknowledging his salutation, Benouin, the valet, heard a strange sound issuing from His Eminence's room. His ear to the door, he decided the patient must be delirious. For what he heard was singing. A cracked falsetto voice actually singing, or trying to sing, a popular song :

*" Si le Roi m'offrirait Paris,
Paris, sa grande ville,
J'aime mieux ma mie—oh gai—
J'aime mieux ma mie ! "*

The man felt it his duty to investigate. Gingerly—the Cardinal was apt to be short-tempered if disturbed—he put his head round the curtain. And there was His Eminence in his seat by the fire, the cat curled upon his knees, the monkey perched on his chair-arm, feeding the little caricature of humanity from his comfit-box and cackling to it. He looked much better, more cheerful than since the beginning of his illness.

"Do I require anything, you rascal?" The master spoke quite pleasantly, "I'll require you to be more careful in future if you value your thick hide! You put my purge in this bottle instead of my cough mixture. I just stopped the King in time from pouring it down my throat. Have you been paid to poison me, you blockhead?" /

That unhappy young man, the King of France and Navarre, went back to an interview incomparably more painful. The ordeal now before him rose up not as an obstacle to be overcome, but as a torture from which there could be no escape. If he hoped that love would give him words to make her understand, or her its insight, disillusionment met him like a giant.

He tried to show her what he saw, but such a vision had no reality for the girl, torn by disappointment and resentment.

"France!" she stormed with a loss of control which even in that hour recalled to him her uncle's revelation of their origin. "You say you love me and you talk of your Country! I could laugh! You make me hate the very name of France!"

That other Mazarin, no less passionate, had cried out that he loved France.

The miserable hour dragged on—fled on—moments full of rancour and reproach—moments full of a hot desire to call back yesterday and forget to-morrow—tears, kisses which nearly won him back. Sneers for which he had no answer; sobs which stabbed his heart with pity and self-reproach.

The sad hour passed, for him too painful for remembrance, for her too bitter ever to be forgotten. For if his love were the purer, she suffered where she could least bear it. She lived by her pride, and when at last, incredulous, she found herself brought up against the wall of an incomprehensible resolution, her self-control gave way. They parted on her angry words, but when his footsteps had died away on the stairs she listened for the unbelievable brutality of the closing door and then threw herself on the couch to wail aloud. She even tore at her black hair, all curled and gemmed for him, as on that occasion which had so amused Philip when she had railed at Death for threatening the man she coveted. Now she wept for herself, for her failure, her humiliation, and also, to do her justice, because although she had sent him away in anger she longed to feel his arms again.

The great Romance did not end on that note of tragedy. Its fate was sadder. It was destined to drag on a few months more, a backwash of ebbs and flows, and, after her departure to La Rochelle, in a stream of letters. There were still to come those midsummer evenings when Marie, wandering by the edge of the desolate sea, could tell the moon her lover loved her still. But the high stars remained inexorable for the poor little gazer. Absence, the friend of new passion, the foe of defeated love, performed its dreary work. The letters became rarer, said nothing, ceased.

The King travelled all down his kingdom to receive his Spanish bride. His mother, his brother and his indispensable

First Minister accompanied him. The retinue was noble, the progress the most imposing the impoverished treasury could afford. Towns and villages turned out and greeted it with the most loyal enthusiasm. It took three months to reach the Pyrénées.

There the greatest match in Europe, the pledge of peace, turned out to be a queer little creature, under five feet in height and almost an albino. She dressed in the mode of his grandmother and spoke her two or three words of halting French with a strong accent. Painfully shy, she was full of her own importance.

Notwithstanding shyness and self-importance and linguistic impediments, she fell head over heels in love at first sight with the tall dark young man from Paris, who wore his grandeur as easily as his elegant modish clothes.

When the happy pair entered their capital *en fête* to welcome them, they found the fashionable world intrigued by another marriage. Mlle Marie Mancini and His Excellence the Constable-Prince Colonna. The bride's uncle received lavish compliments. What a devoted guardian! No pains too great to establish his dear wards well in life! But His Eminence had had no trouble at all. The Constable was enamoured of a charming portrait, and the lady's anxiety to be wed as soon as possible was surely a flattering assurance of affection reciprocated.

CHAPTER III

MARCH, 1661

*"There is in him (Louis XIV) stuff to make four Kings
and one honest man."*

Mazarin.

WITH the signing of the Treaty of the Pyrénées of which his King's marriage was an essential feature, Mazarin's reputation reached its zenith. France emerged from twenty years of war as the First Power in Europe, strengthened on all her frontiers, her position good for a lifetime of Peace.

A lifetime, the statesman reflected with bitterness on his sick bed in the magnificent Palais Mazarin, surrounded by priceless treasures unsurpassed in the collection of any monarch. Surrounded, too, by his many relatives, all solicitous for his state and for the disposition of his worldly goods. It afforded him a wry enjoyment to keep them on tenterhooks, sparring at each other, each intriguing to oust the other from his last good grace. He savoured this final testimony to his power over mankind. He could yet hurl a challenge at the advancing Enemy, still put up a brave front in the losing battle with Death.

Scarcely able to crawl from bed to arm-chair, to hold a pen, he kept his secretaries at work over Marie's marriage contract and that of his favourite Hortense. He insisted that Armand de Meilleraye should wed the latter at his bedside and should adopt the name of Mazarin before he would set his signature to her princely settlement. He spent days dictating, revising, cancelling, and finally busied himself over a new Will which should astonish the world. Dead, he would rule the living for generations to come. The shape of their destiny should be *his* shape. In the few days remaining to him he would carve out a future for Philip of France also, and by it repair the outstanding error of his statecraft. For the Minister had miscalculated over England. The despised Stuarts he had judged fallen, whom he had driven out of their asylum in France to propitiate Cromwell, had been recalled by England, that incalculable nation of heretics and regicides, and restored with acclamation to *their* royal estate.

The Cardinal, turning and groaning on his uneasy pillows, every position less endurable than the last, every mouthful of food to be paid for by torture, ground his teeth to recall that it was not a year since he had declined with suave contempt the offer of the beggar Charles Stuart for the hand of his Hortense; that he had tossed away a throne for his favourite and loveliest niece, to say nothing of jeopardizing relations between France and Britain.

No use crying over spilt milk. Too late for Hortense, now reduced to a mere de Meilleraye, but Prince Philip could yet be used to marry with England. That little Cinderella, Henriette Stuart, who with her tragic mother had starved in Paris during the Fronde, in the very days when her father had faced the doomsmen at Whitehall, was now His Britannic

Majesty's best-loved sister and a first-class match. She was the very pawn for the Statesman's last game.

Philip made no objection. He might protest languidly that he was not fond of girls, but Cousin Henriette was as well-born as the Infanta Marie-Thérèse and ten times prettier and a hundred times more enticing. If, to strengthen the State, one must marry, reflected young Philip (now Duke of Orleans, sonless Uncle Gaston having considerably died at the right moment for his nephew), it would be a satisfaction that Fate, so partial to brother Louis in other respects, should at least repair her injustice to himself in the important article of marriage.

Queen Anne was delighted to see her favourite son content. The Stuarts in London appeared gratified. Henriette and her mother embarked for France. Thus it was in a caressing atmosphere of gratitude and applause that Jules Mazarin panted out the dregs of life in the state bed-chamber of his Palace, denying his doors to Olympe, snubbing the solicitous Queen Anne, drawing up three sets of marriage articles with a keen eye for dynastic possibilities where Philip was concerned, for all the world as if he had a hundred years to live.

His activities were so surprising that few around could believe him a dying man. The Queen least of all. He had been ill so many times before, given up only last year; doctors often make mistakes! When towards the end of February the invalid suddenly insisted on being removed to the Royal Castle of Vincennes, she viewed it as a sign of returning health and happily made ready to hurry after him from the Louvre.

But the journey in cold wet weather was too much for a desperately ill man. When Anne arrived, accompanied by both her sons, it was to be greeted by the physician's verdict—a matter of days only. She refused to believe it; she hung over that pitiful bed, tender as a lover, unwearying as a nurse, solicitous as a fond wife of many years.

Louis often marvelled at her unfailing patience. For on this, his last appearance, the veteran actor let slip the costume of restraint and permitted his real self the luxury of a part. He had no more reverence for the Queen, no courtesy left for the woman who loved him; he rejected her ministrations with wounding phrases—"You'll be the death of me! Your touch is rough! What are the nurses

paid for?" He dragged off the coverings to exhibit his legs, mottled gangrenous sticks, pus seeping through the dressings. "You see these, Madame? These are the legs worn out to give peace to France!"

But the faithful lover never betrayed her hurt, her fatigue or apprehension. She was unfailingly cheerful in the sick-room; on her lips the sufferer was always a little better—a trifle stronger—had passed a better night.

Mazarin, irritable with Anne, exacting to the nurses, was at his best with Louis. He liked to know the young man was near him, brightened at his approach, watched him depart wistfully. And the King appeared little less patient than his mother. He would sit at the bedside for hours, occasionally reading from the papers which Mazarin still insisted should be brought to him daily, but for the most part in quiet attention listening to the sick man whenever he wished to talk.

He evinced no disinclination for this wearying attendance, though it was remarked that he rose immediately whenever the Queen, in a spurt of jealousy, would declare the dear Cardinal must be left in peace to sleep.

The household at Vincennes intrigued less by the drawn-out sunset than by the unknown dawn, watched the young King anxiously. How did he really regard the imminent loss of his indispensable prop? Was it apprehension or relief which hid behind that appearance of a concerned and grateful foster-son? What was going to happen next? What had men to expect from King Louis the Fourteenth?

They roused him from a deep sleep to go to the dying man. Rising instantly he stumbled sleepily along the shadowy corridors behind the valet lighting him. He understood that they were about to administer the Extreme Unction.

The huge vaulted room was dim in all its corners. Candles burned on a wall altar; before it at a Prie-Dieu knelt a nun, a swathed figure, all dark brown except for the slip of white profile gleaming from the sombre head-dress and the pale hands fingering the massive rosary lifted from her girdle. A chaplain, a stole round his shoulders, stood near the great four-poster of which the curtains were looped up on either hand; another priest knelt near him. A second nun was busy with some vessels on a table. Further back in

the shadows two physicians and Mazarin's devoted Benouin stood wearily, their tired faces almost invisible. His mother bent over the pillows. Louis thought, they have waited here, all of them, these many nights to watch him die. Will they have to wait to-morrow?

He took up his stand by his mother. "Is it the end?" he said to her.

Her whisper held reproach. "Hush! He might hear you. You might wake him. He is sleeping peacefully at last. They want to anoint him. I hope it will not disturb him. It would be a great pity if he were awakened."

Moving gently he whispered to one of the priests that he would turn back the bed covers for the ceremony. The chaplain looked a little surprised, but the assistants stood back to permit the King to render this act of affectionate piety.

He turned his gaze to the bed. The figure lay a long narrow mound hardly lifting the scarlet counter-pane and ending in a waxen mask with filled eyeholes, yellow against the white pillows. Not a face—the moulding of a face. It did not suggest sleep or repose but rather inanimation, the absence of life. The priest touched the sculptured eyelids carefully.

"Through this Holy Unction and through His tender mercy may the Lord forgive whatever sins thou hast committed through sight."

Louis's mind was not given to the sins past, nor to the mercy to come, but to the shattering present. Here was the end of those marvels of thought and consideration; end of the eyes which had unriddled the faces of Kings and Diplomats, of the ears into which so many secrets had been poured, of the tongue which had beguiled, directed, launched the sentence of doom upon battalions of mankind; and he thought, he always listened to me kindly, and advised me of his best. He drew back the sheet from hands claw-like; the nails stood apart from the shrunken flesh.

"Through this Holy Unction . . . may the Lord forgive the sins of thy hands."

He considered; these hands have worked for France these twenty years. The feet moved him most of all. Could anything be more pitiful. Helpless as the feet of a babe who has never walked. The swelling was gone and the long delicate bones protruded through the transparent skin. They reminded him of the pierced feet on a crucifix.

The brief rite accomplished, the priests drew back as though they could do no more for the soul imprisoned in that marble of flesh, and the young man stood alone watching the glassy face. Surely this was Death ! No, there was something, a thread of sound, thin and persistent ; the last possession of this lord of vast possessions—his dying breath. Once detected, Louis could hear nothing else. He felt it as a Presence, the lifelong companion of the defeated man persevering in his lost cause after the defection of limbs and senses.

"He spoke to you—he murmured 'Louis' just before he fell asleep," his Mother whispered from the other side of the wide crimson bed ; he did not speak. He waited as all in the room waited, conscious of little movements, the faint tapping of beads, a murmur of prayer, the rustle of a nun's starched cap, but dominating all, that tenacious whisper of breath. Mechanically his lips joined in the intercession for a departing soul, but his eyes gazed at the frozen face till its strangeness became well known. The tiny breath became familiar also. Suddenly he was aware of it as an accompaniment to another sound. A strong pulsing rhythm, a song in the shadowed room. It was a moment before he recognized it as the beating of his own heart. In its strength it began to drown the poor little competitor. A sense of reproach impelled him to press his hand to his mouth as if to forbid the boasting of the hot young blood ; he moved, and with movement that imperious pulse became inaudible, but as if it had struck its puny rival into silence also, he could no longer distinguish any sound. He bent forward, gazing, listening ; the face was the same, the hands were the same.

The physician was holding a small mirror before the cracked parted lips. With a gesture he exhibited the unclouded surface.

In that instant Anne, the patient and hopeful, sprang to a passion of denial. "He's not dead ! Don't tell such lies ! It's but another swoon ! Where is the cordial ? He has taken nothing for hours ! Haste, Sister, give me the spoon !"

It was pathetic and horrible to watch her, a desperate obdurate woman, parting the yellow lips to insert a trickle of wine into the defenceless mouth—to see it ooze back through the stubble of grey hair, wetting the rigid chin, to

see her wipe it away so tenderly and try again and yet again.

"Madame—dear Madame—it is useless. Let us pray for him."

She pushed away the nun's hand. She glared at the physicians. "Why do you stand there? Why don't you try to bring him round?"

Louis ventured to approach, to take her arm.

"Dearest Mother, come away. Let me take you away."

She shook herself free. The wine ran down her dress. "Come away! Leave him! Who cares for him but I? Let me be! He wore himself out for you! Much you know or care!"

He stared aghast at the ageing passionate face throwing words at him like blows.

"You never loved him, though you owed him everything—and he loved you. His last word was 'Louis'—God knows why! You, who afflicted him with your miserable love affairs. That wicked girl! You brought him to his grave—the pair of you! Love her! What do you know of love? You don't know what it means! I loved him. I knew how good, how noble he really was. Always so kind to me—the only man who ever was kind to me!"

Louis gave a quick apprehensive glance around. The shocked attendants hastened to withdraw; only the two nuns kneeling side by side at the Prie-Dieu remained, immobile, lost in prayer.

"Mother, hush! For pity hush!"

She laughed derisively. "Hush! What do you fear? Isn't he dead? Didn't that man say he was dead? Why be silent then? It's time you heard the truth for once!"

He caught her arm again, and now with no gentle hand.

"Stop! You're beside yourself! You don't know what you're saying!"

She did not thrust his arm away this time but, held by him, mocked his disturbed face with her excited eyes.

"Poor Louis! What do you fear? Why you look just like your father who feared everything all his life long! His mother and old Richelieu, his friends no less than his enemies! Even his despised wife! He was even afraid to beget his own son—"

The look of apprehension faded from his face: he dropped her arm and leaning heavily against the bed, sighed aloud.

She went on more calmly, more bitterly. "If you don't know it already you may as well know it now. It was the veriest chance that ever you were born! The chance of a stormy night and over much wine drove my husband to me."

She threw up her head in a gesture of pride.

"The best part in you was my resolve that those scurvy French should not triumph over me, the despised and barren. That man lying there was worth a thousand of your Royal Father: but you needn't fear. Jules Mazarin was not your father—you are not so fortunate!"

He said imperiously, "Enough of this! Say no more, Madame!"

She smiled scornfully. "'The King'! Yet I'll dare to give you one last command, my son. Go! Leave me to myself."

He turned from her, went a few steps and then looked back. She had bowed herself over the bed; he saw that her face had fallen to humbler lines, and his heart opened to her.

"Mother, don't send me away in anger."

She did not look up. Her voice was dreary now.

"You do not understand. I'm not angry with you. I'm not thinking of you. I want to be alone with my husband."

Back in his room his first action was to throw open a window. The early morning, little paler than night, entered cold and damp, but to him it came clean and as a refreshment. He stood and inhaled it in deep breaths. Behind him at last the smell of disease and death; impotence, bondage and above all that sly, shameful doubt. The end of the life of humiliation and repression. His day had come.

The gloomy March morning, the sad prospect of grey, prison-like walls, grey trees, ghosts veiled in creeping rain, were for him as fair as a dawn in June. The future—his future. France—his France. Dominion—and all pertaining to it—his! That blessed hour was shadowed by no vision of his loveless marriage, his ignorance for his stupendous task, the forces against him. He was free and King! What had said the dead—his last word? Farewell or prophecy? "Louis" only "Louis"—the Winner of the Game.*

Leaning from the casement his hands grasping the wet

* Ludovicus. The Victor of the game.

stone, the thin rain sprinkling his hot face, Louis lifted up his heart in a passion of gratitude to his unknown father, the unloving, unloved dead, who in his turn had once been King of France.

CHAPTER IV

L'Etat—c'est moi."

Louis XIV.

MARCH, 1661

DURING the Cardinal's last illness accommodation at the Castle of Vincennes was strained to the utmost. Following the royalties, Olympe de Soissons, Hortense and their brother had hastened to their uncle's bedside. Half a dozen distinguished ecclesiastics were in attendance. Mazarin himself had sent for the chief Ministers of the Crown. These, with their servants, made up a household greatly in excess of house room. Noble personages were allotted screened-off corners and shared garrets. Conditions were makeshift, and grumbling universal.

Perhaps the three ministers had the most cause for discontent. The past fortnight had been a harassing experience. The Cardinal had been at his worst, irritable and baffling. Down to the eve of his death he had refused to depute his authority to any one of them. He insisted on their presence but kept them in the dark ; not one knew whom he had designated to succeed him. In addition to anxiety as to their future, each had private distresses. Le Tellier, the Minister for War, had brought the gout with him from Paris ; Hughes de Lionne, Minister for Foreign Affairs, had left a sick wife, and Fouquet, Surintendant of Finance, had been compelled by His Eminence's summons to abandon a new love affair just when it was becoming interesting.

Yet perhaps it was M. Nicolas Fouquet who made the best of the situation. He was Mazarin's right-hand man and as secure in his Chief's favour as any dare deem himself. During the past few months the Cardinal had thrown out a few dry hints from time to time : little enough, but sufficient

to encourage a man who had a high opinion of his own merits and was an optimist by nature. A gay, sociable companion, kindly when there was nothing to lose by it, he shrank from the sight of disease and suffering. It was a penance to him to spend an hour in that lamentable sick-room; nothing but his hopes of filling shoes so soon to be vacated could have kept him there. He was genuinely sympathetic towards his unfortunate patron—a ghastly exit from a successful life—but he was even more sorry for himself. It was hard on a man of feeling to be exiled from Paris and his charmer in order to watch a poor fellow die by inches in a dreary hole where there wasn't a girl worth a second look or a dinner fit to be eaten.

Nevertheless he contrived to amuse himself as well as the situation permitted. Overnight he had spent a passable evening with the bride, Madame Hortense, and her young sharper of a brother. Shut in her room, a lackey posted on the stairs (it would never do for Queen Anne to think them heartless), the three had scribbled lampoons and gambled till past midnight. M. Fouquet had lost two hundred pistoles to clever little Hortense, but he had recouped himself by out-cheating her brother. Between them they had accounted for a half-dozen bottles of first-rate Sillery, and when the Surintendant had stolen back to his uninviting lodging at one o'clock in the morning, his man Péquée, intelligent fellow, had had a cup of steaming Hollands waiting for him. He had slept the sleep of the just.

Unjustly broken! At the preposterous hour of six the valet was arousing him with the news for which the whole Castle waited. Poor old Cardinal! But a happy release for him and everyone concerned. After all, his sufferings were excruciating. "I'll have a dozen Masses said for him," thought Fouquet. Crossing himself sleepily he turned over on the pillows, but the fellow would not let him be.

"What's that? The King has sent for me? At *this* hour?"

As he hurried over his toilette, Péquée assisting, Fouquet grumbled to his faithful servant that the Cardinal at his most tiresome had never been so inconsiderate. What did the young fellow think would be gained by holding a Council before breakfast?

He was an easy-going man, however, and by the time he

was washed, shaved and perfumed, spruce in a new suit of bottle-green velvet, the most sombre garments his hastily-packed luggage afforded, Fouquet could admit excuse for the summons. The King—he had nearly said the *new* King—was not much more than a boy. It was small wonder if he were worried and distressed. He had left everything to the dead Minister, God rest his soul, and no doubt had entertained some affection for him.

Nicolas Fouquet had frequently seen his young sovereign in Mazarin's study, sitting quietly while momentous discussions were in progress, his share in them apparently hardly more than that of a spectator. He could not recall ever having witnessed a dissension between master and pupil, or even hearing a well-founded rumour of dissension. Young Louis had always seemed content to lead a life of frivolous amusement, ballets and dances, hunting, a little playing at war. That was as it should be : a Prince's function was to be a Royal figurehead, a leader of Society, a Patron of the Arts—to enjoy himself and leave government to those whose business it was. By which he meant : yesterday Mazarin—himself to-morrow.

"After all, I'm the one who has the financial position at my finger ends," he reflected, as he hurried along the cold, ill-lit corridors ; "and in the state of the Treasury it's money he'll be crying out for. The man who can give him that will be indispensable."

In the King's dressing-room which was ante-chamber, wardrobe and his chief valet's bedroom, Fouquet found his two colleagues already waiting. The Minister for War, M. Le Tellier, appeared only half awake with his thin peevish face in creases under a blonde wig set awry. Le Tellier, who was in his sixties and nearly bald, had recently adopted one of the fashionable perruques, and his old habit of scratching his bare head often disarranged the new covering. Hortense had mocked this mannerism in the wittiest dog-geral last night. The Battle of the Lice, she had entitled it.

Lionne, the Secretary for Foreign Affairs, was immaculate as usual. He had had the foresight to bring mourning with him, of course, but he yawned behind a white, ringed hand as he lent his ear to Le Tellier's whispering.

"Good morning, Gentlemen," said Fouquet affably. "This is a sad day for France."

M. Le Tellier agreed. It was a sad day ; it was also very

early in the morning. Did the Surintendant know why His Majesty had sent for them at six o'clock?

M. Fouquet did not know precisely what the King had in mind, but he anticipated that it was to acquaint his faithful Ministers personally with the sad loss his service had sustained; possibly to give them some instructions.

Hughes de Lionne arched his eyebrows. "Mighty original, my dear M. Fouquet. The same possibility had occurred to me. But why at six o'clock?"

Both gentlemen laughed softly. Fouquet made a gesture towards an inner door. "I believe so," murmured the Marquis de Lionne. "I fancy I heard his voice a moment ago. I understand he's been up all night. Most touching!"

"That's all very well for young people with no work to do," grumbled the Minister for War. "I'm close on sixty-five, and I've been kept awake half the night with my foot. Just dropped off when my man called me. Now I'm to cool my heels in this draughty place!" He gave a spiteful glance at the window. "Wide open—in March, and the rain coming in. Do you fancy you could reach it, M. Fouquet? I shall catch my death!"

"His Majesty affects fresh air, I'm told," observed Fouquet amicably and without moving.

"Let's hope he doesn't affect fresh advisers," said de Lionne with a lift of the traced eyebrows which gave his thin, aristocratic face a touch of light malice.

So unpleasant a suggestion upset M. Le Tellier. "Good God, Marquis! You've surely no reason for such an extraordinary supposition."

Lionne seated himself in the only chair in the room. "I assure you, my friend, I've no reason at all. It's too early for reason. I take it we're here to learn his Majesty's pleasure and I hope with you it will prove pleasurable hearing. But I agree as to the window. M. Fouquet, you're a young man: may an old fellow trouble you so far?"

Fouquet permitted himself to be troubled. He shut the offending casement carefully, resenting the manoeuvre which threw on him the onus of appearing to interfere with the arrangement of the King's dressing-room or the odium of appearing afraid to shut a window. Inconsiderate couple! No doubt Le Tellier was after the Premiership himself. Lionne was too lazy to be bothered with it. A shrewd diplomat, almost inspired when he troubled to concern him-

self, but incurably indolent. As for Le Tellier, he wouldn't have the ghost of a chance : too old and always ailing, besides the Queen Mother disliked him. Who else was there ? Séguier and the two Briennes. The Chancellor Séguier was a nonentity. Brienne the father ? No real experience of responsibility. The son ? No ballast, and too young, though he was said to be the King's friend ; if the King had any friends ! Really, without vanity, there was no wholly suitable person to replace Mazarin except himself. If the Cardinal had been as good as his hints, the young Sovereign was already aware of his merits. Mazarin was almost certain to have extolled the qualifications of the subordinate he had trained in his own methods. And no one could deny that he, Fouquet, did credit to his master. His facility for money-making came near to genius. He was second to no one—not even Mazarin—where juggling with money was concerned. The only difference was that one hoarded the blessed coin, the other made it fly. " I'll have to go warily for a bit," thought Fouquet. He wished the Minister could have held out a month or two longer to give him time to whip round for the new tax on sugar. " But I'll drop in a few thousands myself if young Louis starts grumbling ! "

He looked at his handsome diamond-set watch. Poor old Cardinal ! Dead three hours already ! He must have left a pretty pile. Fouquet wondered who had inherited ; he surmised his friend of last night, that monkey Hortense, would take the lion's share. What would a vulgar, ignorant girl like that want with such treasures of art and beauty ? Fouquet, a liberal patron of both, speculated as to whether the Mazarin heiresses might be induced to sell. It was unlikely that they would value the magnificent collections beyond their extrinsic worth and there was a certain nymph in alabaster—a Cosvoyex—an enchanting thing !

The door opened so suddenly that old Le Tellier jumped. There was a slight scramble for precedence between the two elder men, then Lionne entered first with Le Tellier in a flurry on his heels. Fouquet did not hurry. He walked in with the decent composure becoming a man who has just suffered the loss of a revered chief.

The King's bedchamber, the only apartment he had for his private use in that crowded fortress, was a large cheerless place, hung in faded red, with a few dark red rugs on the flagged floor. Crimson curtains were drawn closely

round the four-poster bed. It looked like an ugly red hearse, thought Fouquet. A fire was struggling on the cold hearth, and between the two windows (one of them open, Fouquet noted maliciously) stood a desk with candles, writing materials and a pile of blank paper. The morning light had come now, white and heartless, paling the glow of the candles, the only cheerful objects in the room.

The young man who had sent for them faced them from an arm-chair behind the desk. He wore a plain suit of mourning with a falling white lawn collar, tied, as were his white frilled cuffs, with bunches of black ribands. The dark brown hair hung thickly on the collar and framed a face whereof the serious expression contrasted with a warm brown complexion and full red lips.

"Good morning, Gentlemen."

Just that. No smile, no rising, not even an inclination of the head. Fouquet was glad that Lionne, by virtue of rank, was the obvious spokesman, and he admired the facility with which that diplomat walked round the table and obtained and kissed the unoffered hand. Born of a legal family, Fouquet sometimes regretted that his early education had not familiarized him with such tricks of a gentleman's trade. Le Tellier ducked his head and Fouquet bowed profoundly.

A few chairs and stools were ranged against the walls, but seats were not offered. Intention or thoughtlessness, queried Fouquet, and he remembered with regret that Mazarin had always invited him to sit.

The inconsiderate young man favoured each one of them with a look. Lionne, elegant, debonair, at his ease here and everywhere; Le Tellier, nervously fidgeting with his wig; and Fouquet, standing with an air of deferential attention which was perhaps a shade over-correct.

"Gentlemen," he began, and looked at the virgin sheet of paper under his nose. He's more nervous than we are, thought Fouquet, noting a spread of deeper red in the face which bent over the desk.

He looked up again, at no one in particular, and resumed with the expressionless delivery of a speech learned by heart.

"Gentlemen, I have summoned you as the principal Ministers of my State. I desire to acquaint you with my intentions. Hitherto it has pleased me to allow my affairs to be conducted by the late Cardinal. In future I shall be my own First Minister."

He stopped sharply. The astonishment which was shared by all three auditors was felt by each as a touch communicating itself from one to another. Surprise checked speech. Le Tellier was the first to find words.

"But to whom does your Majesty desire I shall address myself for—for—what of routine matters . . . ?" he spluttered.

The young man answered simply, "You will please bring everything to me."

"But Sir," expostulated the bewildered man, "I speak of trifling matters, everyday business : passports, minor promotions and the like. I signed everything for His Eminence. You do not intend to—the Chiefs of Departments will continue to be responsible for all that, of course ?"

Fouquet felt annoyed with the blundering old idiot. Why force an issue at this moment ? He was conscious, too, that Lionne shared his vexation.

"M. Le Tellier, I do not wish anyone to sign anything or grant anything on my behalf. I intend to look into everything myself first—to sign everything"; the repetition was dogged. "Is that clear to you ?"

"Very good, Sir," said Le Tellier sulkily. "I fear it will cause a—make a—there'll be a lot of difficulties—but if it's your Majesty's pleasure there's no more to be said."

The grave young face turned to Lionne. "M. le Marquis, you will take what I have said to M. Le Tellier as applying to yourself also. I shall hold a Council of State as soon as the Court returns to Paris. You will all three be in attendance naturally, and the Chancellor and Messieurs de Brienne also. I desire you, M. de Lionne, to have ready for me a"—he hesitated—"a memorandum, a *précis* I should say, of my relations with the principal foreign Powers ; the Treaties in force, the Agreements as to Trade, any disagreements or violations or any other thing detrimental to the interests or prestige of my State. I intend to see everything," he repeated, looking at the blank paper again.

Lionne preserved an imperturbable face. He bowed and inquired in a casual fashion, "And when does your Majesty purpose to return to Paris ?"

"On Friday. I count on you to have the information I require ready by then."

Fouquet threw a rapid glance at the Minister for Foreign Affairs. Poor Lionne ! That lazy, easy-going man ! Could anything be more preposterous—childish ! The whim of

an ignorant boy anxious to show off his new authority. Well, he'd soon have enough of it. Show everything, sign everything, why the young fool would have to spend his days clerking at that rate! Fouquet felt annoyed but more derisive. He was contemptuous of such crude ignorance when his own turn arrived.

"M. le Surintendant, how much money is there in the Treasury?"

Behind the mask of courtly attention, Fouquet experienced a shock. This was not amusing, however baldly phrased. Taken aback, he hesitated perceptibly.

"Does your Majesty refer to the estimated yield from the tax gatherers, or the amount of current revenue from all sources, or to any possible surplus remaining from last year's receipts?"

He finished against the steady persistence of the dark eyes.

"I am asking you for a total."

For the life of him the financier could not restrain an indulgent smile.

"I fear we are not precisely affluent at the moment—as your Majesty doubtless knows from the Cardinal, but there is—there always will be—ample to cover any expenditure your Majesty may require. Your Majesty has only to name the sum."

That ought to please him, he thought.

"That is not an answer to my question, M. Fouquet."

Not a hostile voice, not resentful, but definitely authoritative. Such intractability roused the Minister. He was conscious that beside him Le Tellier was appreciating his discomfiture.

"I ask your pardon, Sire," he said with some warmth, "but your Majesty will appreciate that it is difficult to give even an approximate figure at short notice. The credits to your Treasury vary from day to day. They vary, too, in kind and value. Besides specie, French and foreign, we have also bonds and promissory notes, also home and foreign. They fluctuate, especially the latter. Then there are titles of value and reversions. If your Majesty desires it and will be pleased to allow me the time to return to Paris and put the matter in hand, a statement shall be laid before you as soon as possible. I shall hold myself at your Majesty's disposal to submit it to you at any time you may direct."

Louis inclined his head. "I thank you, M. le Surintendant,

that is precisely what I require—a detailed statement. Meanwhile”—for the first time he appeared uncertain, his hand played with a quill lying before him—“this—approximate figure; do I understand you would have to get that from Paris, also?”

The change of expression was not lost on Fouquet. Now was the moment to impress this young ignoramus with a proof of his own competence.

“By no means, Sir. I always keep a copy of essential documents at hand—in my own custody, of course.”

Smiling, he drew a leather wallet from the breast of his coat and laid it on the table.

“Just a partial summary of taxation. Your Majesty might be interested to glance over it. Perhaps I might have the honour of assisting your Majesty to do so.”

Louis took the wallet in his hands. He spoke almost graciously.

“Thank you, M. le Surintendant. I shall be happy to avail myself of your services . . . a little later—I will let you know. That is all for the moment, Gentlemen. I will wish you good morning.”

He stood up. The Ministers had nothing to do but make their bows and exits. As they went through the dressing-room another young man, a slight exotic figure wrapped in a gay pink dressing-gown, his light brown hair flowing in curls, his feet in high-heeled scarlet slippers, sniffing at a nosegay of herbs, sauntered in. More deferential bows, but these most affably acknowledged. Philip of Orléans was desolated with bereavement. “What a blow, Gentlemen, what a blow! I feel as if I had lost a father! I shall have to be cupped! But what consolation to remember that my brother has such worthy advisers as yourselves in this harrowing moment! Good day, Gentlemen. Enchanted!” He fluttered into the room they had just left, and they heard the gay protest, “My dear Louis, what monstrous energy, or is it my watch which has stopped in sympathy with your late lamented Godfather?”

A laugh, and a voice Fouquet hardly recognized, so pleasant so young it was.

“Philip, stop it, you crazy fellow. Have you come to breakfast?”

Le Tellier took himself off grumbling. He would make

his people give him a good rub down and get back to bed !

As soon as he was out of earshot, Fouquet drew Lionne towards his own lodging. There, the door shut, he put the question he was longing to ask of this man whom he trusted, whose intelligence he respected and who, by virtue of his intimate connections with the Court, was in a position to give him a reliable answer.

"What do you make of him, M. de Lionne?"

The Minister for Foreign Affairs had a light phrase for the inquiry he had anticipated, but something appealing in the perturbed, sensual face arrested it.

"What fly stings you, my friend?"

"Pardie, surely you resented his manner? Too Augustan for anything! There are ways of asking things. His Eminence was sweet reason herself by comparison."

Lionne waited.

"See here, Lionne, we're old friends. You can trust me. Didn't it strike you that there was something behind the King's extraordinary attitude? On your honour, now?"

The diplomat gave the other a look, kindly but searching. "On my faith and honour, Fouquet my friend, I believe the King to be an honest young man with no ill-will towards you or anyone else."

Fouquet looked relieved. "You think so? You should know him better than I do—but I must say I found him insufferable."

Lionne smiled. "Don't take it to heart—I don't. It'll pass. If you had been kept in leading-strings for years you'd jump at the chance to handle the reins for a bit, now wouldn't you? It won't last, though. He'll soon get tired of signing passports. I give him three months—less if a pretty girl gets hold of him."

Fouquet laughed now. He opined such an unattractive young fellow would never make a ladies' man. Mademoiselle Marie was said to have done all the wooing in that chaste romance last year. The laugh deteriorated into a snigger; as for the young Queen, he, Fouquet, had it on the best authority that the poor lady was often to be seen in tears over her husband's indifference. No sign of an heir yet. "It'll be a case of like father like son, I shouldn't wonder!"

Lionne did not appear amused. He dismissed the best authority with a flick of aristocratic fingers.

"Never listen to Maids of Honour, my dear Surintendant ; they grab your money and tell you fibs. I know 'em ; it's my business to select spies. You asked my opinion, and I'll throw in my advice. You probably won't take it, although your sphere is handling coin and mine is handling people, and I know what I'm talking about. Don't try to hoodwink the King. Tell him the truth, even if it's unpalatable—for you to tell and for him to hear."

Fouquet's eyes fell. "That wasn't Mazarin's way with him !"

Lionne moved to the door ; at it he turned. "Mazarin's way ! Ah, nobody knows what that was besides a dead man who can't talk and a living man who won't. Au revoir, my friend. Like our good Le Tellier, I'm for bed !"

Fouquet did not return to bed. He knew he would not sleep if he did. His nerves were still on edge. He ordered a good breakfast and sat over it telling himself that Lionne was right as to his opinion of the King, and wrong as to his advice on how to deal with him. Give him three months. That was right enough, but as to enlightening him on the real position of affairs, what a ridiculous idea ! Why, it might even cost him his post. Not, he excused himself, that he was the only one to blame for the depleted Treasury. He had inherited the corrupt administration, the horde of slack, dishonest officials, the bribery and sharp practice that permeated every department of taxation from one end of the Kingdom to the other. He had only done as others did, Mazarin on the greatest scale of all ; but, unfortunately, he now stood in the unenviable position of the man responsible. Working under a chief whose hands were deep in the royal money-bags one was fairly safe. A dozen times he had seen Mazarin wink at peculation, but Fouquet's instinct told him that a full or even a partial confession would hardly be an acceptable introduction to the owner of the ravished millions. No, of course Lionne did not understand money matters. The only course was to go on keeping the King in the dark, or if that were not entirely possible, throw dust in his eyes and prove to him that black is really grey, if not white ! It would mean a certain amount of secret restitution—a sacrifice of, say, half a million livres or so—and above all it would be necessary to allow no subordinate, no intermediary, to come between himself and the King over the matter. Thank God his interests were equally those of his staff. He had never grudged them their pickings ; not an

official at the Bureau de Finance could betray his Chief without betraying himself. No, the only possible thing was to go on hoodwinking young Louis until such time as he should weary of this absurd inquisition. Three months, Lionne had said—what else had he said? Unless a pretty girl . . . Once he got the better of his rawness some woman was bound to get hold of him, what with his youth, his conceit and that unappetizing Spanish wife of his. Lionne was a shrewd dog in his own business, although an ignoramus where money was concerned (he wouldn't be content with a beggarly two thousand per annum if he understood his own opportunities), but he had lived amidst palace intrigue all his life. Maids of Honour? Perhaps not, but a woman friend—a really devoted woman would be very useful at this new unpredictable Court. The Queen's women were not a very promising set, but there was Henriette Stuart's household, now in process of formation. Hortense Mancini had been chattering about it last night; she was dying to get near to King Charles's darling sister, of course. Not that these selfish Mancinis would give a hand to anyone except themselves—but if he looked round surely he could find someone . . .

In the midst of his reflections Fouquet gave a gasp. His hand darted to his breast pocket—that absurd doggerel Hortense and Philip Mancini had had such fun over last night!

*"Le vieux renard est mort. Ce qui veut dire
Que la France est réduit au plus bas de son sort,
Car s'il lui restait quelque chose à prendre
Le voleur ne sera pas mort.
Aujourd'hui notre bon Maître, le Roy,
Qu'il a tenu comme enfant, comme poulet, comme fou,
Aura la chance de s'amuser un peu.
De grâce Fouquet, jete-lui quelques bons sous
Pour qu'il paie, argent comptant, cette Nièce qu'il a eu!"*

and more of the same spiteful rubbish.

God in Heaven! What misfortune! What a fool he had been, what a blind, absent-minded idiot! He had stuffed the cursed thing in his wallet—that last verse was so amusingly dirty he had refused to let Hortense tear it up. It was *her* composition, the malicious little devil, but it was *his* scrawl. If that pompous young ass, full of his own

importance, read *that*—tucked away with that impressive array of figures—it might mean his ruin. Despair engulfed him. He could have wept. Then the struggle for self-preservation began. It could not be too late, it was scarcely an hour since. Most unlikely that the King should have attacked those accounts already with his scatter-brained young brother chattering and clamouring for breakfast. And, blessed recollection, that confounded scrap of paper was folded in the other side of the wallet, apart from the official lists.

But there was no time to lose. Retrieved it must be somehow. He must keep his head. If only there were someone he could trust to get it for him ! But here at Vincennes there was nobody. If only poor old Mazarin were alive ! The Cardinal might have been an old fox, but he had a heart ; one could have approached him. It may be questioned if any of the courtiers of that Castle of Death mourned the dead man more sincerely than his Majesty's Minister of Finance, an elegant figure in green velvet, doing his best to appear unconcerned, a gentleman on a harmless errand, as he crept along the passage leading to the Royal apartments, fear in his heart and a prayer to his Patron Saint on his lips !

That light and carefree prince, Philip of Orléans, had an object in his early visit to his brother, beyond that of an invitation to breakfast. For him the one important matter in the world at that moment was his marriage. In that he desired to enlist his brother's aid.

The ceremony had been fixed for a fortnight hence, but his mother was already urging a postponement until the period of Court mourning should have expired. All very fine to cry one's eyes out for the dear lamented, but what about little Cousin Henriette ? Philip supposed the living merited a trifle of consideration. Here was the bride, trousseau complete, gifts pouring in, guests invited, and, as one might say, the very wedding-meats in the oven.

Monsieur*, slipped feet on the table, pink satin dressing-gown falling apart in graceful folds to display a lace-trimmed nightshirt and a pair of white, plump legs, his posy of disinfectant herbs flourished to illustrate his points, waxed

* Note. The eldest brother of the King of France was known as 'Monsieur'. His wife as 'Madame', his eldest daughter as 'Mademoiselle'.

eloquent on the theme of his affections. He was furiously in love and he might say without vanity Henriette, dear girl, was crazy over him ! The poor child had suffered disappointment enough already. Look at that wretched attack of measles which had detained her three weeks off the English coast, on ship-board, too—with sea-sickness no doubt to crown her misfortunes. Was she to be prayed to put off her wedding-day a second time ? An ill omen for a bride. Too much like tempting Fate !

Louis, amused by his brother's habitual extravagances, and secretly flattered by this appeal to his new authority, was not ill pleased at the opportunity to do him a favour.

His mind wandered to his own unhappy appeal to Mazarin ; he hastened to express his sympathy with this pair of distressed lovers. Philip could count on his good offices with their mother. It might be advisable to curtail some of the ceremonial of the great day, he added with a return to caution, but after all that was a question of detail, easily arranged.

"Tho' I can't for the life of me divine why you're in such a hurry to get into bed with the bones of the Holy Innocents !" he laughed.

Their young Cousin's excessive thinness was an old joke between them, but this quip was scarcely respectful when the Duke of Orléans' Betrothed was in question. Philip suspected the possibility of envy in the husband of the well-covered Marie-Thérèse. He hastened to extol Henriette's perfections. Her sojourn in England had improved her out of all knowledge. She had put on flesh, grown. Her complexion was dazzling. "It's that English beef ! They eat it at every meal I'm told. Raw—or as good as raw. But it's sovereign for the complexion." Henriette's cheeks were like roses. An adorable creature, and Philip had lost his heart to her.

They took their time over breakfast. Louis was a hearty eater, Philip a fastidious one. The brothers returned to the King's room arm-in-arm and on the best of terms. In return for his elder's assistance, Philip generously bestowed on him invaluable advice on his own problems. He had passed the three Ministers coming in. Who was to take over Mazarin's Office ? Nicolas Fouquet would be Philip's choice. An able fellow who kept open house and an excellent table. "Good-hearted, gives dinners and pensions and

all that to starving artists and poets and all manner of needy fellows. Plays a good game of cards, too, and makes no bones about losing." Fouquet was a man of fine feeling besides an open-handed host ; knew his place and never asked questions. "I don't mind owing to you, Lou, in confidence mind, he's helped me out of a difficulty more than once when I couldn't squeeze a sou out of the Departed. I'll tell you what," he added generously, "I'll approach him for you, if you like. It's a bit embarrassing for you to start by pleading poverty. I don't mind admitting as between brothers you've got the business head of the family, but for little affairs of finesse you want your humble servant !"

Philip stuck his thumbs in his armholes and swung a leg.

Louis did not respond to this attractive offer. He appeared to be rummaging in the drawer of the table, but Philip, concerned to do that decent fellow the Surintendant a good turn, repeated his recommendation.

"That's the sort of Minister you want. Someone who'll take all the bother off your hands and fork out the louis d'or. Appoint him : you'll never regret it !"

Louis took out Fouquet's wallet and untrapped it.

"I'm not going to appoint Fouquet or anyone else," he remarked with conscious carelessness and avoiding his brother's glance. "I intend to be my own First Minister !"

Philip mimed a lively representation of a gentleman staggered beyond belief. Between gasps of laughter he sketched an industrious figure in a crown, trudging to and fro an office, driving a quill, counting on his fingers and watching the clock—"and so home to bed and the admirable Marie-Thérèse !"

His picture appeared to him so excessively comic that he could not finish, but lay back laughing till the tears rolled down his cheeks.

Louis, the open wallet in his hand, had no reproof for this sauciness. He lifted a puzzled face. "What can have happened to it ?" he said as he looked under the table.

"What's the matter ? What are you looking for ?" Philip addressed a back. His brother was at the window now, leaning out. "Have you lost something ?"

Louis turned round, his face more perplexed than before.

"I wondered if it could have blown out, but of course that's impossible. I didn't take it out—I put the wallet in the drawer under a book : there isn't a key, so I couldn't

lock it. There never are any keys in this neglected place ! ”

He took up the leather case and examined it again. Removing some papers from it, he held the wallet upside down and shook it.

“ Someone’s been tampering with this ! ”

“ Not guilty,” said Philip carelessly ; “ but can’t you say what it is you’ve mislaid ? What is it ? ”

Leaning forward, hands placed palm downwards on the table, Louis appeared to reflect.

“ I don’t know what it was,” he admitted slowly. “ You came in before I’d had time to examine, but I’m positive there were papers in each side of the wallet—these here tied up with silk and a thinner paper by itself in the opposite compartment. That’s missing now. How I wish I’d looked at them properly first,” he added ruefully.

Philip wagged his head. “ Palsambleu ! A sorry beginning for the new First Minister,” he observed with gravity.

“ Can’t you stop playing the fool for five minutes together,” said his brother irritably. “ This is an important matter. Someone must have stolen it. But how ? And why ? ” His eyes wandering round the big bare room saw the door open and Laporte’s head.

“ Monsieur Colbert, Sir. He says you ordered him to be here at eight.”

Philip rose yawning and stretching his arms. Mazarin’s man of affairs was no favourite of his. A dull, glum fellow ! If Louis could snatch an hour from Ministerial duties they might ride together after dinner. “ Au revoir, mon cher, and don’t forget what I said about Fouquet. That’s the man you want ; and when you’ve got him, squeeze him ! That’s the way to handle Ministers. You squeeze them and they squeeze the next fellow ! ”

He drifted out, posturing and twisting his fingers to illustrate the ideal process for obtaining that essential, elusive commodity : coin of the realm. He was in excellent humour, having gained his own point so easily and, true to his habit of a conscious charmer, he vouchsafed a trickle of graciousness on the man in brown, who, carrying a worn black beaver and a shabby black velvet bag, waited in his dressing-room.

“ A pleasure to see you, M. Colbert.”

But as he sauntered down the corridor towards his Mother’s apartments, he told himself that such haste to do business

over a scarcely cold body was not merely fatiguing and undignified : it was positively indecent ! But Louis always had been a dull dog where matters of taste were in question.

The short man in brown walked in briskly, ducked his head in the direction of the desk and waited, looking straight before him. He evinced no surprise at his sovereign's occupation which appeared to be that of ransacking every piece of furniture in the room.

Jean-Baptiste Colbert, Mazarin's confidential clerk in charge of his master's multifarious private affairs, had long since exhausted his capacity for astonishment, but his native suspicion remained unimpaired. Alert under his bushy greying brows, the deep-set pale grey eyes followed the active figure in mourning, from armoire to chest, from chest to bed, and back to the table whence he pulled out a drawer and plunged his arm in the drawer-hole. Colbert only removed his gaze when the King, with the air of a man at a complete loss, seated himself heavily at the table and looked up at the newcomer.

"M. Colbert," he said.

The Clerk's observations had included the table, writing materials, new quills, unused paper in a stack, some other papers, lists by the look of them, scattered about ; an empty leather wallet—a handsome article with initials or a crest—it wasn't the fleur-de-lys, some sort of an animal—a squirrel : that would be Fouquet's property.

"You were to bring me His Eminence's Will."

Colbert had brought what he had been ordered to bring.

"I've only a few minutes to give you now. You'd better read it to me, I suppose. I'll read it myself, later," he added.

The short man in brown deposited his bag on the table. It was a homely affair, fastening with a draw-string. He pulled it open and extracted carefully a roll of parchment tied with a cord of scarlet silk and well sealed. Colbert's fingers, the short, thick-ended fingers of a peasant, held it with reverence.

"Does your Majesty prefer to break His Eminence's Seals ?" he inquired, extending the roll.

"You can do it yourself," said Louis indifferently. His thoughts were not with the Cardinal's testament. It was all he could do to wrench them from this inexplicable disappearance to give his attention to the elaborate legal phraseology

with which Mazarin's lawyers had clothed that last gesture which was to astound the world.

A magnificent provision for Hortense the Duchess, moderate legacies for the other girls and his nephew ; the huge bulk, the residue of the princely fortune, estates, the Palace, treasures, investments in Holland and Italy, plantations and slaves in the new Colonies, all were bequeathed "to my Sovereign to whom I owe everything."

The Chief Clerk droned on ; the common accent, the expressionless delivery repelled the listener. Louis, to whom the contents of the Will were no surprise, allowed his attention to wander again. How could anyone have abstracted that paper, and why should anyone want to ? In all probability only M. Fouquet, who had given it to him, knew what was in it. No, he must have lost it somehow, pulled it out and lost it. There was no other explanation. A poor beginning for one who prided himself on his own precision and despised carelessness.

"Very good, M. Colbert. Now this is for your careful attention. I instruct you to put the necessary legal formalities in hand to restore the bequest to myself to His Eminence's relatives in the same proportion to which they were entitled under the previous Will. Give effect to my orders as soon as possible. Wait——" he added after a moment's thought. "It is my desire it shall be made public that I am unable to accept this munificent gift from my well-beloved Minister, since it is at the expense of his natural heirs."

If Colbert succeeded in concealing his astonishment, he could not acquiesce in such unnatural abnegation without remonstrance. To his "Very good, Sir," he added almost pleadingly, "It is a total of 2,000,000 livres !"

He winced at the cool, "So I apprehend," and began to roll up the document gloomily.

Louis watched while the coarse, stubby fingers exerted themselves on the stiff, resisting parchment. It sprang loose ; the fingers began again, clumsy and patient. The hands of a peasant, thought the King. Mazarin had told him that this man's father had begun life as a village shop-keeper. He admired the patience, the persistence, with which the obdurate roll was forced and persuaded, the knot tied twice, secured with the strong teeth. It occurred to him that those teeth would hang on like a bulldog's to anything they attacked.

He observed suddenly, "His Eminence recommended you to me."

The Chief Clerk imprisoned the defeated document in the black bag, knotted it and tucked it under his arm. This would not be a man to lose papers!

"He spoke of you more than once. He entertained a high opinion of your parts and devotion. Now that His Eminence is dead, do you desire to enter my service?"

Colbert muttered something huskily about his gratitude to his late master, but the proposal did not appear to excite his enthusiasm.

"What have you to say?"

The man cleared his throat. "In what capacity, may it please your Majesty?"

Louis inspected the whole figure. The unfashionable clothes, the obstinate but not unintelligent face.

"I may require a trustworthy man in the Ministry of Finance."

The heavy face darkened. "That would be under M. Fouquet."

Louis was not slow to correct this familiarity from his Minister's inferior.

"Naturally you would be subordinate to M. le Surintendant."

"I always acted for Monseigneur. He was my master for ten years. I've never had any commerce with the Surintendant's Office."

Louis noted the hint of hostility. He turned it over in his mind in relation to the other figure, elegant and suave, which two hours before had stood where Monseigneur's servant now stood. The supercilious gentleman who had put him off with an array of incomprehensible terms, who had offered him, as one offers a gift to quieten an importunate child, a sum—any unspecified sum—from his own Treasury. What a mortification to be compelled to confess to this superior person that he, the King, had lost one of the documents entrusted to him. A paper of which he had taken so little account that he did not know its nature. "I regret to have mislaid the paper you kept apart, M. le Surintendant."

He looked angrily towards the man standing there with his commonplace mulish face—the man Mazarin had called a genius with figures.

"Well, M. Colbert, think it over. No, don't leave yet. You may be able to assist me in a trifling matter. Seat yourself."

He indicated the row of folding chairs he had not offered to the Ministers.

"M. le Surintendant left a few matters with me. I have not had leisure to give them my attention. The Finance Minister is a very busy gentleman, and I don't wish to disturb him unnecessarily with trifles. You can doubtless tell me what I require to know. Are these complete?"

He pushed the papers across the table. Colbert took them up, looked at the first and arranged them in sequence. He inspected them carefully. A thick finger ran down the columns like a streak as he totalled, brought forward and checked from the first figure to the last. He looked up at the interested, watching face. "They appear correct."

"I asked you if they were complete."

The Clerk hesitated. "They are totals of receipts from taxes on certain commodities. Copy totals," he amended cautiously. "The additions appear in order, your Majesty."

Louis held out his hand. The movement was impatient. Colbert saw a frown deepen as he turned over the papers, and divined that the young King did not comprehend the significance or method of the calculations before him.

But the other was not attempting to disentangle them. He was making up his mind. As he saw it, State papers left in his charge had vanished. Before leaving the room with his brother he had noticed that the wallet held papers on either side, and his memory was reliable. He had placed the wallet in the drawer—he had looked vainly for a key—even then it had annoyed him to come across another example of the penury and makeshift to which his houses were abandoned. Finally they had gone off to breakfast leaving Laporte in the outer room, and that entirely trustworthy attendant had sworn he had only left it for five minutes to bring Philip his cursed flowers. Nothing in order, servants, keys, doors, furniture! I'll make some changes before I've finished, he promised himself savagely. And now here was this stupid clerk refusing to give a simple straightforward answer. Le Tellier, Lionne, Fouquet, even this subordinate, one and all had their objections and evasions for him—the King!"

He spoke sharply. "You persist in using the word 'appears.' Either the papers are complete or they are not complete, M. Colbert!"

The Chief Clerk might have resented this incisive tone, his

face closed, the pale eyes went blank. "The taxes are not in my department," he muttered.

Louis's suspicions took form. It was obvious the little man knew more than he would say. He struck the table with his hand.

"Speak the truth."

"I made so bold as to tell His Eminence the truth about things once, and all I got was a rating for my pains!"

Louis gave the unresponsive face a full authoritative look. "His Eminence is dead. In my service, M. Jean-Baptiste Colbert, a gentleman may hope to climb high if he merits my favour. But I have no use for half devotion. I'll not be played with or kept in the dark. Answer me, sir. So far as your knowledge goes, are these papers complete?"

Before he had finished speaking, Colbert had made up his uneasy mind. It was a gamble, and he was no gambler. But it was, though sooner than he expected, sooner even than he desired, since his case was incomplete and his proofs inconclusive, an opportunity to start upon his secret ambition: the ruin of the Minister whose dishonesty he despised and whose Office he coveted. It was a step in the dark. He had no idea of the relations between Minister and Sovereign, nor why the former had left his papers with the King, but his mind fastened on the two things clear to him. The King was suspicious about something; he, Colbert, knew what good reason he had to be suspicious. Fortune had given him an approach to the Royal confidence. He decided to push himself through the barriers.

He looked up at Louis waiting with a certain angry patience.

"I can't answer your Majesty in a moment. It's not easy to give an answer. I don't want to be mixed up in the affairs of another Department; but, as your Majesty insists, I should say from what I have heard—from what the Cardinal let fall at one time and another—that a man would need to think twice before he took the estimates of the Finance Ministry at their face value. I don't know whether these particular papers are complete or not, Sire; I don't think it matters a sou in any case. What I am pretty sure of"—the man looked at his feet, the common voice was low and dogged—"those figures won't bear proof—a proper examination." The feet shuffled a little—"not those figures, Sire."

CHAPTER V

MARCH—JUNE, 1661

"Mademoiselle de la Vallière, one of the Princess Henriette's women."

Pepys.

THE marriage between Philip of Orléans and Henriette Stuart was celebrated three weeks later. In consideration of the bereavement the nation and the Royal family had sustained it was a wedding in private, an intimate family affair. The bride won universal admiration. A thin, fragile girl of sixteen with no real claim to beauty but with her full share of Stuart charm, she entered the assemblage of noble guests on her pleased young husband's arm, a fairy-like vision in bridal white, snowdrops round her chestnut hair, at her breast, on her skirts, and a posy of the delicate white and green flowers in her hand.

"C'est son Ange Gardien," murmured an emotional cousin, and the phrase was caught up and repeated.

At first Philip was proud of the admiration bestowed upon his bride. He sunned himself in the popularity the match evoked. The happy pair departed for a short honeymoon at their new country home at St. Cloud amidst blessings and orations. But brief as the honeymoon was, it outlasted the bridegroom's passion. Intimacy brought jealousy and disappointment.

Henriette was no dainty nonentity, no flattering audience for a vain partner; his affectations first amused and then irritated her; his outbursts of malice repelled. She was too young for tolerance; he could not endure ridicule. Monsieur and the new Madame returned to Paris and the Palais Royal, their town house henceforth, a mutually disgruntled young couple. Philip hastened back to his bachelor cronies and their extravagant, dubious amusements. Henriette, looking round for a friend, found one in her brother-in-law. Louis was agreeably surprised at the change a few months residence in England had worked in his cousin. The little Cinderella had blossomed into a charming young woman with the wittiest tongue, the easiest manner in the world.

The King was happy to escape from the tedious society of the Spanish ladies, his wife and his mother, to spend his leisure in the company of Madame and her gay, youthful Court. It carried him back to the old days at this same Palais Royal, though Henriette's circle was more intellectual than that of the Mazarin sisters. The bride had brought a few distinguished Englishmen in her train and English was all the rage in Paris that Spring: English fashions, English handshakes, English horses and dogs, English music and ballads, and above all the admirable English cloth. Henriette awoke from disappointment in marriage to find herself a social success.

She organized ballets and concerts, made up parties for picnics by moonlight and bathing in the Seine. Louis followed in her train—in his spare time. Contrary to expectation he was still assiduous in attendance at the Council Chamber, at the Conseil des Finances, but Henriette dominated his amusements. Throughout April and May they danced together, rode together, acted together, flirted and enjoyed themselves, till Philip, piqued by his brother's easy conquest of the interest denied to himself, became ferociously jealous. His complaints were not guarded. Before long Marie-Thérèse woke up from her absorption in the state of her important health—she hoped for a Dauphin in November—and an indignant wife joined forces with an outraged husband. The Queen-Mother of France, the Queen-Mother of England (the latter had remained after her daughter's wedding for a few months respite from England of tragic memories), both august ladies gave Henriette a proper scolding; but neither of them relished the idea of remonstrance with Louis. Anne dropped a grave word to her elder son, but since the night of the Cardinal's death their old easy relationship had vanished. As for the bride's mother, the long habit of dependence still heavy on her despite the promotion of her fortunes, for nothing in the world would she have provoked dissension with the most important of her nephews. Her time for scenes was past. She contented herself with informing her rebellious daughter that if Minette desired to break the remnant of her unfortunate mother's heart she was going the right way about it. A few tears shed, Queen Henriette retired to her estate of Les Colombes, her chapel and her prayers for the Living and the Dead.

Her daughter passed on her scolding to Louis between a

flirt of her fan and a shrug of thin white shoulders. But her warning was of the slightest. She did not intend to forego her first grown-up admirer and indeed her only real friend in this new exciting life. Philip, left to take up cudgels for himself, waited for the right moment and the sharpest weapon.

Meanwhile the King and his sister-in-law became faster friends than ever. The Court, Parisian Society and humbler folk no less, were happily scandalized, and gossiped to their hearts' content. The ladies tore the Englishwoman to pieces over fragile little dishes of the pale scented tea she had made fashionable, and the English Ambassador could not sleep at night for worrying as to whether it would be wiser to enlighten Whitehall or leave them in the dark for the present.

M. Nicholas Fouquet was as interested in the Palace drama as most. He only regretted that the attractions of Madame did not draw the King more frequently from his Department. His Majesty still worked regularly with him, three hours at a stretch on three days every week, although Lionne's wagered three months had barely a week to run. The Surintendant was fatigued by this excessive devotion to business : it was a strain on a man ; but he was no longer much perturbed. The King's attitude to him was unimpeachable. He was invariably courteous and appeared to defer to an experienced Minister's knowledge of affairs.

Although the Surintendant was hard put to it on occasion to maintain a constant intelligent fabrication for the delusion of his Sovereign, he flattered himself that he had won the trick. At the cost of a few thousand livres and a handful of forgeries he had satisfied the embryo financier that all was well.

Meanwhile he had become a favoured guest at the Palais Royal. The flattering attentions of this man of the world won young Philip's heart. M. le Surintendant contrived to convey with delicacy that he, Monsieur's devoted servant, might be a useful one ; a generous loan and Fouquet was soon in possession of Philip's views on the Royal family scandal. Fouquet's sympathy with the indignant bridegroom was unfeigned. He could find excuse for a child like Henriette (he had a weakness for pretty young women), but if there was a man in France whom the Surintendant disliked more than another it was his Sovereign Lord. No amount of politeness and gullibility on Louis's part could

eradicate that disagreeable first impression. The King had given his Minister the fright of his life and moreover had compelled him to a course of vexatious duplicity : he had planted that fellow Colbert in his Department, particularly commending him to the Surintendant's notice as a useful assistant. One couldn't reasonably object. It was the Cardinal's last wish, the King had said in that irritating unanswerable way of his, and no one could deny that the man was a good, all-round worker ; but he was not Fouquet's type, and his presence necessitated the employment of a lot more caution in covering up one's tracks.

For all this and for the reason that he was never at ease with the Master whose inheritance he had eaten away, Fouquet blamed Louis—that ignorant, conceited young ass whom no one in their senses would have employed as a junior clerk had he been a private person. If only things had fallen the other way round and young Philip been King of France, there would not have been much doubt as to who would have been First Minister then ! Monsieur had too much *savoir faire* to interfere with matters beyond his comprehension. Pah ! It was enough to make a man swear ! And now the fellow hadn't the decency to get a woman for himself, and could find nothing better to do than make trouble over his brother's newly married wife. Monsieur had no more zealous champion than the Surintendant.

Obligations to this loyal friend merited a return. When M. Fouquet requested an appointment, a modest one, for a young lady in whom he was interested, Monsieur was happy to do him the favour. A certain Mme de Choisy, an acquaintance of the handsome du Plessis, the Surintendant's particular friend, was anxious to obtain an *entrée* into the world for a god-daughter, a deserving little creature from Touraine. She was a nobody—just of the *noblesse*. Her father had been well enough, an officer who had fought for the Royal cause during the Fronde. But he was dead, and the mother's second husband was impossible. The girl was only sixteen and convent-bred, but she had had some experience of how to behave. The Gaston d'Orléans ladies had taken her up and dropped her. The poor child, superfluous at home, was at present stranded in Paris. The kind god-mother had taken her in and was, it seemed, her only friend.

Mme de Choisy, at the end of her story, had pressed a

mediocre diamond ring on Mme du Plessis' acceptance, but omitted to disclose that her protégée's mother had promised her two hundred pistoles to take an unwanted daughter off her hands, though Fouquet's experienced mistress divined it for all that.

As a result of these negotiations Mme de Choisy was the richer by one hundred and thirty pistoles down and the promise of the balance by Michaelmas, Mme du Plessis had a new jewel for an admirable white hand, and M. le Surintendant, generous man, placed a maid of honour in the household of Her Royal Highness the Duchess of Orléans. As for the young lady thus auspiciously started in life, Mlle Louise de la Vallière entered on her career under obligation all round—to her family, to her god-mother, to her dressmaker, to that exalted benefactor, M. Nicolas Fouquet.

The Surintendant had an interest in his benevolence. He had not forgotten the advantage of a protégée in the Royal household. He caused a few inquiries to be made about the girl. Mme du Plessis—and later he himself—went to inspect her.

The La Vallières were reported to have come down in the world. The mother's second marriage had cut her off from the relations of her first husband. There was a brother, a couple of years older than the girl, something of a young wastrel by all accounts. The step-father had sent the son and daughter up to Paris to push their unlikely fortunes. It did not sound too promising, but on sight Fouquet decided the débutante would do. Though not strikingly pretty, she seemed a modest likeable creature, well-mannered and not a fool by any means. She had been well educated in her Touraine convent, and had the advantage of a little English wherewith to please Madame Henriette.

Mme du Plessis was quite enthusiastic about her, the grateful little soul! She only needed some decent gowns and a little rouge to be a beauty. Her lover told her to get the girl what was necessary and to choose it herself. He did not give her his real reason for risking his money. He judged the young woman, self-effacing, admiring, grateful, might prove a consolation for Philip. A refreshing contrast to the assured, brilliant Henriette, thought the Surintendant.

June opened in a burst of sunshine. By the end of a week

Paris was insupportably hot. The Queen-Mother decided to carry off her daughters-in-law, the interesting Marie-Thérèse and the troublesome Henriette, to the coolness of Fontainebleau.

The two Courts lumbered off to the woodlands palace, an interminable procession of gorgeous plumed and gilded coaches, boudoirs on wheels with their quilted linings of blue and scarlet satin, their bouquets of roses and lilies, their little folding tables across which the occupants played cards, scribbled lampoons, flirted and quarrelled. Wagons piled high with furniture and baggage preceded and followed the score of highnesses, the dozens of lords and ladies, the maids of honour to three Royalties and the duennas in charge, everyone's waiting-women and valets, a horde of cooks and launderers, while a troop of musketeers and another of the Queen-Mother's Guards headed the cavalcade and brought up the rear to clear the road and protect the salt of the earth on its twenty-mile journey to escape the sun.

The whole company travelled at the royal expense. A monstrous charge on an empty exchequer, mused Louis, his gloom in no way dispelled by his Finance Minister's cheerful assurance that there was not the slightest necessity for his Majesty to spoil his holiday by worrying about funds. The society in the Royal coach did not improve his humour. Queen Anne lay back on her cushions, silent and melancholy, as habitual with her nowadays. Under the thin black silk mantle her hand sought her breast, questioning the pain of which she never complained. Queen Marie-Thérèse made up for her mother-in-law's lack of conversation. Delighted at having her husband to herself for once, she chattered to him incessantly in a mixture of very correct Spanish interspersed with the queer French he was beginning to understand. But her only topics—her health, her meals and the superiority of everything Spanish—began by boring and ended by repelling him. The prospective father found himself regarding the young woman opposite in her purple brocade apprehensively. Her flaxen ringlets, her pink and shiny face, the prominent light blue eyes, above all the portly outline, made up a picture at once pathetic and obdurate. If she looked like this at five months, what would she look like at the end of her term? If she gabbled like this at twenty-three, what of forty-three?

Husband and wife entertained each other with a series

of disagreements, ponderously arch on her side, matter-of-fact on his. The length of the journey, the climate of France, the climate of Spain. Above all they had opposite views on the subject of ventilation. He remarked that the atmosphere of the coach was unhealthily close ; she retorted that in Madrid everyone knew that draughts were pernicious to ladies in delicate health. With unruffled good-humour she suggested a game of Reversi ; with sudden animation he suggested that Philip and Henriette should be invited in to play. Marie-Thérèse explained that if the coach were too hot already, two more occupants must inevitably increase the temperature. Queen Anne, with a sigh, intervened with a proposal for dinner.

The next half-hour was endurable. The young King and Queen alike had excellent appetites and at the Escorial, fortunately, conversation was held detrimental to digestion. Champagne and oysters accompanied the armistice. On the appearance of dessert Louis caught up a handful of almonds and raisins and stuffed them into his pocket. He would ride awhile to stretch his legs he informed both ladies with one of his grave smiles. He made good his escape, but Marie-Thérèse looked out in time to behold him entering Philip's carriage.

"I hope the King will not take a chill. The English are so ignorant of the effects of currents of air," she remarked in her perfect Spanish to her mother-in-law, with imperturbable dignity despite brimming eyes.

The Surintendant followed the Court at the end of the week. Fouquet was anxious to maintain his pleasant relations with Philip, was anxious, too, to see how his young protégée was shaping. He accepted a gracious invitation the more readily because it was understood that the King, who had been called back to Paris by urgent affairs, intended to remain there for a few days before rejoining the family party at Fontainebleau.

Leaving Paris very early, hours before the great heat set in, he had a pleasant ride, thinking of the freedom before him and of his Royal Master shut up in the stifling Capital, toiling with his unfortunate Council.

On arrival at Fontainebleau he was agreeably surprised by the apartment allotted to him. It was comfortably appointed ; he need not have sent his bed. The new broom

had been at work in the home department also, he surmised. What a mania for change the young fellow had ! A respectable meal was served to him, a contrast to the hashed-up rubbish of the Cardinal's régime.

Washed, fed, arrayed in a fashionable costume of saffron yellow satin, point-de-France at throat and wrists and knees, huge stiffened bows, lace butterflies, on his best English shoes, Fouquet gave a final tweak to his freshly-curled perruque, accepted his scented handkerchief from his valet, Péquée, and made his way downstairs.

The young Queen, he was informed, was indisposed and would not appear. The Queen-Mother was keeping her company, but Madame was holding her circle in the *Gallerie de Diane*, and Monsieur had sent up a message to the newly-arrived guest to join them at his leisure.

There were changes in the reception rooms also. During the Regency they had presented a neglected, shabby appearance. To-night fountains were playing which had been out of order for years, the windows were wide open to the June evening, the long floor shone, furniture was polished to reflection, there were new hangings in silver damask. The clusters of wall candelabra were already alight ; Fouquet's quick eye detected pure beeswax.

The noble proportions of the gallery, the spacious background it made for the resplendent company, appealed to his sensuous appreciation. Colour, light, grace. Women, most of them young and all brilliantly dressed, sat about at their ease, in twos and threes on the settees and divans ; perched like gay-plumaged birds in the high window-seats ; in little groups chattering from cushions on the floor. The widespread skirts billowed round them in pools of colour. Grass-green brushed knees with orange, poppy-red neighboured coral and yellow. The coiffure of the season was *à la paysanne*. From demure centre-partings sleek ringlets, blonde, dark or tinted the fashionable tawny, dangled round vivacious faces and dropped on white shoulders slipping from low, lace-bordered bodices. The would-be modest heads were decked with posies of flowers, strings of pearls or twists of gay feathers which floated out with every turn of the wearer.

The men were no less resplendent than their ladies. Around the seated beauties they flirted and strutted, gorgeous in short sleeveless coats of rainbow colours. Voluminous

sashes of scarlet, sky-blue and gold bound slim masculine hips, breeches were kilted and be-ribboned to resemble brief petticoats, bunches of gay lute-string tied the wide snowy shirt-sleeves, the fine lace at throat and knees. The gallants made great show of jewels : they glittered from cravats and shoulder-knots, from the handles of short ceremonial swords, from preposterous shoe-bows. Some of the ultra-modish cut a dash with long pendant ear-rings. The swinging emeralds and rubies gave an oriental touch to the rouged, whitened faces framed in curls, natural or artificial, sparkling with gold-dust, which fashion decreed should flow as luxuriantly as possible.

The revolt of Society in London and Paris, the one newly-liberated from Puritanism, the other from Spanish gravity, was extreme. Freedom was the order of the day. Manners were daring, décoltée unabashed, ornament profuse.

But piercing the extravagance, the outstanding feature of the assembly was Youth. Many of the languishing beauties were girls in their 'teens. With the exception of officials, few of the men were over twenty-five. The painted faces were those of excited children, their sophistication transparent, their gaiety unaffected and full of mischief. The Surintendant, overseeing the room with the indulgence of middle-age, smiled benevolently at the clatter. Everyone seemed to be laughing at once. Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves.

At one end of the gallery, on a long settee upholstered in rose-pink satin, sat the bride, Madame, Duchess of Orléans.

Henriette Stuart held herself erect, away from her cushions. Her thin, childish face was animated ; she chattered incessantly. Her gown of grass-green silk was patterned with fleur-de-lys in silver ; trails of tiny rosebuds outlined the top of her low bodice and twined across the green skirts spread fanlike over the rosy sofa. She wore her hair, of the true Stuart auburn, frizzed up to her ears in two great bunches of ringlets and bound round with a string of pearls and a knot of green feathers. She was painted and powdered and curled and perfumed like the fashion-plate she desired to appear, but it was apparent to a dispassionate observer that beneath all the finery was a thin young girl of poor physique. By the side of Madame, huddled together on the green skirts, were a couple of spaniels, King Charles's parting gift to his darling Minette. Huge sky-blue bows adorned

the dark silky necks. At every movement their mistress made the overbred creatures protested with little nervous quiverings, their prominent brown eyes appealed.

At the further end of the spacious settee, separated from his wife by her lapdogs, her fan, her embroidered shawl, and anything else she could find to lay between them, lolled the twenty-year-old Monsieur, to-night's host and the second gentleman in France. His thin spoilt aristocratic face, framed by dark oiled curls, pointed above an enormous cravat of stiffened Mechlin lace. He surpassed his lady in the matter of rouge and powder and blackened eyebrows. His make-up, his pose, were artificial as an actor's as he lounged among the rose-pink cushions, a figure in the height of fashion with a malicious, discontented face.

A little negro of nine or ten, a cherub of ebony, naked except for a blue loin-cloth, knelt on a white satin cushion at his master's side; the small dark hand controlled the pet monkey whose presence, a terror to the spaniels, had been insisted upon by Philip expressly to annoy his wife.

M. Fouquet bent before his hosts. His reception was gracious. Madame permitted him to salute her chalky white hand. He was just in time, she informed him; they were about to enjoy some music. A countryman of her own, Mr. Horace Smith, had kindly promised them a song—the rage at Whitehall. "I hope you are acquainted with English, M. Fouquet?"

Fouquet's knowledge of that barbarous tongue did not extend beyond a few commercial idioms, and the terms of Exchange, but he proffered his profound admiration for the great poet Miltonius and the even greater M. Waller, whose superb ode on Her Royal Highness's departure from her native shore was beyond all praise. His admirations, indeed, were only bounded by his fine appreciation of the point at which fulsome acquiescence with the wife might become displeasing to the husband. He mollified Philip with compliments upon the grotesque shoe-ties Monsieur advanced for his inspection, and bowed himself away backwards.

Refreshments were in progress. Footmen in sky-blue liveries handed round silver and lacquer trays of wines and sherbert and iced fruit liquors; others offered filigree baskets of oranges, early apricots and crystallized sweetmeats.

Evidence of immature taste, thought the Surintendant, as wine-glass in hand he strolled through the groups, chatting

with acquaintances and looking about for the new Maid of Honour. He appealed to an old crony, a lady of his own age, whose ample bosom appeared about to cast off the control of her fashionable corsage.

"I am looking for a Mlle de la Vallière, one of Madame's Maids of Honour, I believe."

The lady pointed with her fan. Madame's girls were over there, those four sitting on the floor together by Mme de Navailles, their gouvernante. The other two, the favourites, were standing behind Madame's sofa. She had no time to say more, a gentleman had advanced from the group around Henriette and, music in hand, had taken up a position near a bank of flowering plants behind which the musicians were tuning their instruments.

He was a tall, big-boned young man, with a long face and prominent sun-burnt cheekbones. His suit of royal blue velvet, a trifle foreign in cut, with an absence of frills and accessories, gave him a sober appearance, accentuated by the earnest pained expression of an unfortunate reluctant to make himself conspicuous.

He made a stiff bow in the direction of the Royal pair, another to the company in general. Amidst the welcome of clapping hands, a variety of pronunciations proclaimed "Cherry Ripe." Against the opening bars of the melody, Fouquet whispered an inquiry to his neighbour. She protested, "Hush!" waggled a plump hand and in a gentle undertone explained, "A fruit!"

The singer had a pleasant voice, a clear tenor. As the song proceeded his nervousness decreased, though he sang with what to his Latin audience was an unnatural absence of gesture and animation. After the first verse Fouquet lost interest and began to look around the crowded room again.

She was not one of the two girls behind the royal couch. Those were Athénais de Tonnay-Charente, one of the notorious Montemart sisters, a golden-haired beauty, her voluptuous type the ideal of the day; the other a vivacious little brunette, the Montalais girl. His protégée was not one of the favourites, then. He discovered her among a group of young ladies sitting on the floor at the edge of the circle gathered to hear the music. As he perceived her, she rose and stood turned towards the singer, her face lifted as though in expectation. Fouquet's critical eye ran over the standing figure. Badly

dressed ! A tall pale stick of a girl like that should never wear pearl grey, it made her look like a ghost. If she'd chosen something rich, dark red preferably, with plenty of rouge, she could have made something of herself. His artistic sense distinguished her pose as the best thing about her. It was striking, that uplifted, waiting look.

Madame, seconded by the courtiers around her, was begging for an encore. Unjustifiable, thought Fouquet ; the reception had been polite, not overwhelming. The young Scotchman, with the half-ashamed air of one unable to escape, came forward again and amidst a hush of voices, a fluttering of fans, a settling of skirts, the assemblage resigned itself to listen again. One of the spaniels yapped dismally ; Monsieur shifted his outstretched lace-frilled legs and sighed audibly.

The foreigner, an open manuscript book held stiffly before him, gave out his title in precise, careful French :

"A lyric by one of our most esteemed dramatists, Mr. William Shakespeare : 'Who is Sylvia?'"

A little buzz ensued. "Never heard of him in my life, *ma chère*. This William Shakespeare—who is he, then?"

From their cushions on the floor the Maids of Honour whispered with the rest. The girl in grey did not move. Regarding her, Fouquet thought, "She looks as if she's expecting someone!"

The melody floated over the long room :

*"Who is Sylvia, what is she
That all our swains commend her?
Holy, fair and wise is she . . ."*

He sang better now, with more assurance and with feeling. The appeal of the accompaniment assisting, he captured his audience despite their ignorance of the words. Faces lifted to the singer's, fans tapped gently, appreciation could be felt in the room.

Fouquet, still idly observing the girl in grey, saw a change brighten her face. She looked beyond the singer now, beyond the bank of flowers behind him ; she smiled—a sweet warm smile, a welcome.

The violins ascended fervently :

*"To her eyes Love doth repair,
To help him of his blindness."*

A man stood in the opening of one of the doors, the violet of his dress merged against the purple damask curtains. For a moment the Surintendant saw him as a dark presence, then a hand made a sign—a gesture to the musicians to continue, to disregard him.

They had said the King wasn't expected till the morrow. Fouquet was vexed. He thought resentfully that he would not have accepted Monsieur's invitation had he foreseen that unlikely thing, the changing of an obstinate young man's mind. The sister-in-law was the attraction of course! He couldn't let her alone: really it was a scandal. There'd be trouble before his visit was at an end if he knew anything of Philip of Orléans.

Therein he misjudged the man he disliked. Louis had altered his plans for the simplest reason. A sudden urge to be out of the stuffy town, a *longing for the freshness* of the country. Certainly a thought flung to Henriette and a gay evening at the end of a pleasant ride. It did occur to him that it would be amusing to surprise her; it did not occur to him that his unexpected arrival would affront Philip. He knew that it was not of him his brother was jealous, whatever he might pretend, but of the attention Henriette diverted from himself. He felt sorry that Phil should be doomed to play second fiddle in his private life also. Another man would have been proud of such a charming wife, but that would be impossible for poor Philip.

Without foreboding the King set out on the twenty-five miles to Fontainebleau, in the hottest part of the day. Outdoor heat meant little to him. Oblivious of the covert grumbling of the escort, of the perspiring equerry at his side, he rode joyfully, the shadeless roads, the cool woods, equally pleasant to him. He only stopped once to enjoy a hearty dinner by the wayside. That eaten he was in the saddle again with an indifference to digestion that his companions felt to be the height of inconsideration.

He was in high spirits, delighted with the success which was rewarding the work in which his heart was engaged. Already his comprehension of the routine problems of government had marvellously improved. It was amazing how crusted opposition was wearing down, how difficulties disappeared when taken firmly in hand. He looked back on the past three months with satisfaction. A good beginning. But when he looked forward a proud confidence in himself

uplifted his heart. He wanted to shout aloud. The cloudless sky, the sunshine, the glorious woods into which they plunged, all seemed equally to belong to him, to be part of being young, strong and successful—the King !

Reaching Fontainebleau he entered the palace by a private door, and intent on giving Henriette her surprise, forbade the announcement of his arrival. After hastily changing his clothes he went down to join her party.

He heard singing within. Ordinary courtesy demanded that he await the conclusion of the song. Standing partly concealed by the purple curtains, it had interested him to watch the unconscious audience. Henriette, pretty and gay, daintily beating time with her fan ; Philip lounging at the other end of the settee—pity he looked so sulky. Modish women, beautiful girls, magnificent dashing young men. For a moment he saw them all, that picture of carefree youth, as a spectator. It struck him that the instant his presence were known it would change, set in formality behind a barrier of restraint. Regret at his isolation fell on him. Instinctively he stepped back. At that moment, his eyes encountered a face, a smile shone out to him. The shade of loneliness vanished before that revelation of mutual attraction. It was over in a moment, but left his heart beating faster, his mind usurped. The song swelled into the finale.

*"She excels each mortal thing
On the dull earth dwelling !"*

The outbreak of clapping was broken sharply as he stood out and applauded. The coloured circle swayed and broke apart. Rich skirts floated down and out, like opening many-hued petals, as the ladies sank in their curtsies, long curls fell forward from sleek bending heads, scabbards stuck out stiff and glittering from gorgeous reverential backs. He had an instantaneous impression of a figure in pale grey which remained like himself above the homage ; then Madame's gay voice rang out :

"What a delightful surprise ! But you've just missed the prettiest song in the world, Sir."

It was obvious the surprise was not delightful to everyone. Monsieur. was unmistakably scowling after his perfunctory motion of rising from his cushions. Louis might have felt

the constraint which accompanied his passage down the lane they made for him, but still preoccupied with his experience even radiant Henriette standing with hands outstretched had lost reality. He kissed her hand, bowed to one or two prominent personages and took the third place on the settee in something of a dream.

Henriette had taken up her brace of puppies to make room for him. Sitting between the brothers she fondled the spaniels, making play with eyes and fan at one man, turning a satiny, rose-garlanded shoulder on the other. She beckoned to Mr. Smith to approach and receive the Royal compliments, but her vivacity concealed an instant recognition that the person whom she desired to fascinate was not his usual appreciative self. Such oblivion of her charms was not to be permitted.

"Such a charming song! Have you the French words there, Mr. Smith? The King would like to see them."

The Scotsman extended his manuscript with a correct inclination of his long back. With a bewitching smile she passed it to her brother-in-law to share with her. The auburn head and the dark were close as she read out the translation.

Louis looked up at the tall awkward figure standing before him. "And who is this lady—this lady Sylvia?" he inquired seriously.

The answer was supplied in his brother's sneer. "It's English for a thing which doesn't exist. A woman holy, fair and wise. . . . Or maybe they do, the other side of the Channel. They say 'tis the Land of Make-believe."

A little titter arose. Across Henriette and her fan and her spaniels the brothers exchanged hostile glances. The girl coloured up. She laughed a little nervously, and the Scotsman was spurred to rebuke the Frenchman who presumed to say something unacceptable to King Charles's sister.

"Sylvia, Sir, is a character in a play by our admirable dramatist, Mr. William Shakespeare. Sylvia may also be taken as the poet's name for the lady who reigns in each man's heart—French as well as British," he conceded broad-mindedly.

Louis's impassive gaze appraised the speaker planted before him. His expression was not encouraging for this Sir Galahad.

"Thank you. Mr. Smith," he vouchsafed.

It was a dismissal, but the foreigner did not appear to understand. He, as well as the Princess, had caught Monsieur's derisive comment to a gentleman standing at his elbow. "My God, Chevalier, these English! Incredible!"

His wife, angry and mischievous, egged on her countryman. "And where is *your* Sylvia, Mr. Smith? Is she here? Tell! We ladies are dying to hear!"

The young man hesitated. He was chivalrous and fascinated by the Royal beauty, but he had a Scotch caution, and at a little distance he perceived his Ambassador's unsmiling face. He might get out of his depth in this queer foreign crowd if he weren't careful. That little coxcomb of a Prince was evidently an ugly customer, insulting his wife, an English lady, in public! What a poor creature the French King must be just to sit there and suffer it! King Charles would soon have put Monsieur in his place! Of course Mr. Horace Smith couldn't well interfere, but he wasn't going to let these Frenchies think him scared to play up to a lady's teasing.

He spoke sturdily. "A mere mortal, Madame, dares not raise his eyes to the Divinities."

At the little flutter of applause Louis seemed to come awake.

"Doubtless Mr. Smith has left his Sylvia in London, where the most charming ladies come from."

Philip's hand, long and glittering with jewels, flashed out. Fan, shawl and puppies were swept to the floor. Amidst the yapping of the spaniels Monsieur arose. "You don't have to cross the water to find Beauty!" he drawled. "Palsambleu! If I were put to it I could name a dozen Frenchwomen in this company to surpass the finest Sylvia from London!"

His eyes darted maliciously from his brother to his wife and flickered over the two maids of honour standing behind her. "One need go no further than Mlle Tonnay-Charente here!" He kissed his finger-tips to the flamboyant blonde who accepted the compliment with the gesture of an actress: plump predatory hands made show of catching the wafted salute and pressing it to her heart. Her scarlet lips pouted, "Trop d'honneur, Monseigneur," she protested.

Philip bowed languidly to her, then turning his back on his wife and his brother, he tossed an arm over the shoulder of his favourite, the elegant, dissolute Chevalier de Lorraine,

and sauntered down the gallery, tapping on his high-heeled shoes, describing airy gestures with the long thin fingers of his free hand, laughing with elaborate unconcern.

Easy to withdraw on a good gesture ; harder to pass off the resultant *gêne*. The courtiers eyed the couple left on the settee furtively. Louis sat as unmoved as if the litter of costly trifles at his feet were an everyday spectacle. It was Henriette who rose to the occasion.

"Monsieur has excellent taste. Don't you agree with me, Mr. Smith ?"

"Evidently, Madame. 'Tis our grievous loss."

"Charming, Sir ! But we are still waiting to learn who is *your* Sylvia. Come, we poor Islanders must set an example of generosity. Are there no French ladies worthy of an Englishman's homage ? Shall we endure this, ladies ?"

Her little foot tapped as she ran on, laughing and coaxing the stiff figure before her, a goad to the unresponsive man at her side who had so disappointingly failed to rise in her defence.

The young man hesitated no longer. With a bow to his Princess, under the fire of curious, amused eyes, he walked straight to a group of girls at a distance. A clapping of hands, an outbreak of laughter greeted his bow.

Louis addressed Henriette in an undertone. Characteristically, he did not blame the audacious girl at his side. The Englishman was a tactless fool, Philip an insufferable disgrace. "Who has that extraordinary person selected, Minette ?"

Her laugh was a light derision. "A little milkmaid from Touraine. Our worthy Mr. Smith appears to have a taste for bread and butter ! Her head will be turned ! Come, shall we dance ?"

Louis, still endeavouring to distinguish figures of the distant group, inquired carelessly, "Who is she, then, your milkmaid from Touraine ?"

The outbreak of dance music interrupted her reply. The knots of guests broke up. Mr. Smith's tall figure was lost in the crowd ; Henriette extended her hands and they swung into the dance. It was a moment before he repeated the question.

"Oh, a little creature from the Provinces," she told him. "Someone M. Fouquet is interested in. I didn't need another girl, but the Surintendant made rather a point of it, and Philip is in his debt unfortunately. She looks much

older than seventeen, in my opinion. But she's a harmless little soul, quite a good reader. She got me off to sleep last night. I thought I never should fall asleep," she added plaintively.

"Is she very pretty, then?"

Madame burst into a peal of laughter.

"Louis, what curiosity! Is she holy, fair and wise? Don't ask me! I don't believe she's had a partner all evening—except M. Fouquet, of course."

"Why of course?"

She gave him a saucy look. "Oh, the usual reason. Never mind her! You're something distraught to-night, my friend. I've not annoyed you, have I? I can't help Philip's tantrums, can I?"

He did not respond to the mock-pathetic look. He had discovered the elegant figure of the Surintendant leaning over a seated woman. Henriette followed his gaze.

"There you have them, Louis. Mr. Smith's Sylvia—and your Cræsus. The Minister for Finance and my dairymaid. Don't stare at her like that, *mon cher*. You've not the ghost of a chance. Her favours are for M. Fouquet. He pays her dressmaker, I'm told!"

"That girl! Blue Death, what a repulsive idea!"

She noticed the warmth of his voice and thought that Philip was not mistaken as to his brother's hostility to the Surintendant. Her instinct to recall his attention to herself increased. She glanced up provocatively at the dark absent face.

"You dance divinely, Louis. I could dance with you all night."

"You dance like a Fairy," he told her.

The Bransle ended; the King relinquished Madame to the deferential arms of her brother's Ambassador, and proceeded to take a turn through the ballroom. He was not interested in Mr. Smith and his absurdities; for the moment he had forgotten Philip and his scandalous impropriety; he was resenting the revelation that the face which for an instant had called to his heart was only the face of one of Fouquet's women. He glanced towards the pair with something like hatred. Mistress or protégée, it mattered little. Fouquet had placed an intrigante in this unhappy household seething with bad feeling and gossip.

The Surintendant already had Philip under his thumb.

A fine state of affairs ! Minette was a kind little creature, but impulsive and irresponsible. He was not going to permit her good nature to be exploited by a creature of Fouquet's — a second Du Plessis or even a Menneville maybe !

He approached the pair still deep in conversation.

He distinctly caught a gleam of paper in the man's hand hanging over the chairback. He was giving her something. He drew nearer. *Was* this the girl ? She looked strange sitting there in her pale grey gown. Their voices were too low to be overheard. He passed on, stopping at young Brienne, that friend of his boyhood, somewhat neglected of late.

"What are people talking about at Fontainebleau, Léo-ménie ?"

De Brienne's eyebrows jerked towards the Surintendant and his companion.

"They say Mme Du Plessis has ordered widow's weeds, Sir !"

Louis smiled coldly. He turned back and approaching the pair addressed Fouquet.

"M. le Surintendant, I trust you had a pleasant ride from Paris ?"

M. Fouquet bowed and thanked His Majesty ; he had had the most enjoyable journey. The girl rose and curtsied.

Louis said, "Pray present Mademoiselle, M. le Surintendant."

M. Fouquet was gratified to name Mlle Louise le Baum le Blanc de la Vallière, and the young lady curtsied again. He looked. A young happy face.

"You are a newcomer to Fontainebleau, Mademoiselle ?"

"Yes, Sir."

M. Fouquet hastened to the débutante's support. "Mlle de la Vallière is new to Court, Sir. To Your Majesty's Court, that is. She has resided in the household of His late Royal Highness, the Duke of Orléans, at Blois."

Louis observed with politeness that it was interesting.

She looked at him now ; she smiled. Yes, it *was* the same face. The remembrance, the stirring of the remembrance hurt him. Angry because he could not let it go, he said reluctantly :

"Perhaps Mademoiselle will accord me the pleasure of the next dance ?"

She did not hide her surprise. For one moment he thought

she was actually going to refuse him, the next, without a word, without a curtsy, she accepted his arm and he led her through the bystanders and into the centre of the hall, now cleared for dancing.

A stir like a breath of wind ran through the assembly. Heads turned, people whispered and nudged. Colour rose in the girl's face, he felt a tremor in the fingers on his sleeve. She was embarrassed, as he meant her to be, but he was none too easy himself; he was not accustomed to taking the lead with women. He called up the flippancy which the Mancini girls used to provoke from their admirers.

"It would appear that we are providing a sensation, Mademoiselle."

She said nothing.

"But notoriety is nothing to you—you are accustomed to it!"

"I beg your pardon?" she murmured.

"Don't tell me the admirable Mr. Smith is forgotten already. Cruel Sylvia!"

It was insolently said, and it relieved him. He longed to disconcert the girl—this mistress of the scoundrel Fouquet, who, for one moment had deluded an unloved man into thinking hers a lovely face.

"I don't know why he chose me."

Plaintive now, the little fool. "Mademoiselle, what excessive modesty! Of course he chose you—of course I chose you!"

She smiled again, happily. From another girl he might have thought it a young and charming smile.

If Henriette danced like a fairy, the girl Louise danced like a dream. She seemed to float at his side, her feet to glide over the floor, her hand rested on his, light as a leaf. He experienced a new sensation from this partner near to his own height: instead of looking down on an upturned face, he looked into the eyes of an equal. It might have been pleasant with a companion other than Fouquet's light o' love!

This girl was unusual in more ways than one. He knew there was not another of her age in the room but would have betrayed delighted embarrassment at being sought out by the King, but she seemed lost in enjoyment of the dance. Her abandonment to the rhythm communicated itself to him, their accord was perfect. As they ran hand-in-

hand down the opening steps of the Courante, it seemed as if he hastened with her to an adventure.

She danced beautifully, she was pretty, her hair was lovely, its pale perfumed gold so near his face ; but she had a remote look with her down-dropped eyes and unrouged face. Doubtless her conception of a languishing, indifferent siren. But she was no innocent, she had herself too well in hand for a girl in her 'teens. Anyway, his object was not to speculate upon her appearance, but to find out what she had to say for herself. He remarked that doubtless M. le Surintendant was an old friend.

"He has been kindness itself to me." The tone was warm.

"A friend of your family, I take it?"

She did not reply.

"I presume it was through M. Fouquet's kindness you obtained your appointment in my brother's household, Mademoiselle?" he persisted.

Dark blue eyes considered. "It was arranged by my god-mother, Mme de Choisy."

The first evasion! He felt rather contemptuous of such crude deceit. But Fouquet was far too experienced to have chosen a poor tool. The girl might be a little scared of him, he hoped she was, but she was not giving herself away; he was no wiser than he had been at the beginning of the dance now drawing to a close. Should he take her to a seat? Under Fouquet's eyes? It would cause endless chatter, and he doubted his own ability to extract anything from her under such conditions. He needed to have her to himself. Other men managed such things—for other reasons. Brienne would have had the girl out in the gardens and in his arms by now. Would the results be worth the trouble? Would he be expert enough to induce her to give away the man who was her patron if not her lover also?

They passed Fouquet, withdrawn in the crowd watching the dancing. A gentleman in pale saffron velvet discreetly unobservant of his Sovereign's attentions to his young friend. Louis's determination hardened at the sight of him. A scoundrel like that would use anyone, even a girl of seventeen, to further his ends. Colbert's researches had already exposed the part Du Plessis, Menneville and humbler favourites had played in his intrigues.

It was possible this girl was a simpleton in the wrong place. She was more likely an artful slut posing as an innocent. Resentment flared in him. His corrupt Minister, his insolent brother, wilful Henriette and his own foolish playing with fire; Marie-Thérèse upstairs coddling her health, his mother with her heart shut up from him; even that preposterous Englishman of Minette's, and now this girl—this strumpet of Fouquet's—at sight of whom his hungry soul had deluded him with the hope of Love. Love! He would never find it, any more than he would find a true friend. Women would flatter the King, sell him their bodies for what he could bestow, he must even deny himself Henriette's friendship lest Philip's jealousy should grow insane and all their dirty world cry "Incest!" He must remain Marie-Thérèse's husband; father her sons for France.

He had been happy that morning; he was unhappy enough now; it was long since he had been conscious of unhappiness. His thoughts went to the parting with Marie Mancini. That grief was dead, for all it had been real; but the yearning for love remained.

"Thank you for your kindness, Sir."

He woke to the reality of Louise de la Vallière standing by his side, the dance over, waiting to be restored to her lover. He had a moment yet, though. He thanked her for a pleasure given—it was she, the bestower of kindness: he said, lowering his voice, his face close to hers, "Do you know the summer-house near the Wishing Well?"

She breathed, "Yes."

"Could you be there in the morning—early?"

Her look questioned. "How? I should love to, but I don't know. I should have to ask leave."

He hoped she would accept his expression for one of admiration. "Please say nothing to anyone. It's not necessary. I shall expect you at eight. Don't be late. A great pleasure, Mademoiselle."

He did not look back at her, standing as he had found her at Fouquet's side, looking after him.

M. le Surintendant was anxious to hear the outcome of the distinction which had befallen Mlle de la Vallière. The fatherly gentleman had a claim to the confidence of a grateful protégée and it was not withheld. Fouquet was surprised at the pace of the King's sudden caprice. An artist in making

love, the preposterous hour of the assignation repelled him. He told himself that the callous young man who could hold a Council at six in the morning over the still warm body of his dead Minister, would be quite capable of planning a cold-blooded seduction for eight. But he was far too versed in femininity to fall into Louis's error. He recognized the innocence of her delight. The poor little thing was going to put herself in the power of that young brute with nothing to help her but a romantic fancy for a Fairy Prince. An adventure out of a book !

For Nicolas Fouquet, ranging libertine, thief on the grand scale, was by no means heartless. His heart held a soft spot for a daughter of fourteen. As he went to his bed that night he pitied the defenceless child of another father, a soldier who had spent his life for the King's Cause—a fine return ! Poor child ! He wished Mme Du Plessis had lighted on a girl of a different type, but he soothed his feeble conscience with the reminder that there were few of those women downstairs but would give their ears to be in Louise de la Vallière's shoes to-morrow at eight. He was not to blame. He hadn't planned it, he had only put her there to please his friend and if possible to be useful to himself. If it had been young Philip, now, there would have been nothing to regret. A Prince, weak, generous, kind-hearted—an ideal lover for a girl with her way to make in the world. Life was hard on penniless girls without friends. He told himself he would stick by this little Louise, her gratitude was really affecting. She should not lose by it however things fell out, and if she played her hand—his hand—well, why the Premiership might yet be his. Meanwhile he was glad he had paid that shark of a dressmaker for her. How pleased she had looked when he had given her the receipt.

As for the villain of the Surintendant's piece, Louis managed with difficulty to evade a scene with his brother before he went to bed. He would hear anything Philip had to say between eleven and twelve, or twelve and one to-morrow morning. "I can't spare both hours," he said, without a gleam of humour, to his angry brother.

He was unable to escape his wife's complaints. She had heard he had been quarrelling with his brother again : how unchristian it all was. Marie-Thérèse had been kept awake by all that noise downstairs. No one ever gave a thought

to how important it was she should get to sleep early. She was not strong, like Englishwomen. The oranges from Paris had not come, moreover. He had brought them? Well, French oranges were not like the Spanish variety. They all came from Spain? Well, they tasted differently; it must be because no one in France would ever take the trouble to keep them on ice, although it was well known they were the only fruit she fancied!

He told her he would give directions about the ice, kissed her damp pink forehead and remarked she was too hot. She would sleep better if she allowed the windows to be opened. She informed him that the night air was mortal for a Spanish woman in her condition. He wished her good night and Señora Molina good night, and found his own bed at one in the morning.

But between him and his pillow, placed locked on the night table, lay M. Colbert's latest despatch. The golden rule of never leaving one day's letters to the next must not be broken. The conscientious young man glanced over the contents.

M. Fouquet's transactions in the *Marc d'Or*; a plan of fortifications at M. Fouquet's domain of Belle Isle (copy only); account for gowns and lace collars and a riding-habit à l'Anglaise supplied by Mme Dupont to Mlle de la Vallière (a new Maid of Honour to Her Royal Highness the Duchess of Orléans, explained M. Colbert's neat hand); M. Fouquet's kind settlement of same herewith acknowledged with thanks (another copy).

It had been a day of experiences. The last was a difficulty, most unusual, in getting to sleep.

CHAPTER VI

JUNE, 1661

In the morning it was an effort to get up and give his mind to the affair. In the prosaic light of another day it appeared different, unwise perhaps, even ridiculous. It might be more sensible to depute this particular investigation. Why not wait to hear exactly what Colbert had discovered concerning Fouquet and this girl? Colbert had it in hand;

there was no fear of his overlooking anything which might be turned to the Surintendant's disadvantage. There was no real urgency.

But over his early breakfast he told himself that if he failed to keep the appointment she, piqued, would be very likely to talk. It was important that Fouquet should not be put on guard, and if he saw her he could perhaps intimidate her into keeping her mouth shut.

Walking through the woods towards the meeting place he assured himself that his only interest in the girl lay in the Minister's connection with her. After all it was his duty to get to the bottom of the matter : the young woman must be persuaded or compelled to disclose her part in it. His imagination wandered to the man he detested. He saw a figure bending over the Council table, heard the smooth deferential voice—recalled the fleshy tended hands ; every time he saw them he disliked them, but to-day he pictured talons, predatory and unclean ; clutching at everything that should be his and fouling everything by their touch.

A horrible story that Colbert had unearthed came back to his mind. The purchase of a girl—"of good family ; I may be able to get her for M. Fouquet for 300 pistoles." He had not forgotten the actual words, and he recoiled from the vision of a young figure in pale grey submitting to those repellent hands.

He would not think of such things. Fouquet's day would come—was coming, fast—for crimes more heinous than the excesses of his private life.

It was beautiful this morning in the woods. The early sun glanced gently through the branches, the air was clean and refreshing, only suffused as yet by the mounting sunshine. Tall bracken filled the hollows with new green ; at every grass verge cow-parsley held up its fragile lace ; tall, in deep grass, massed windflowers, with wild bees fussing over them, made little pink plantations of their own. Now and again a startled rabbit streaked into the undergrowth. Birds sang and called from every tree and bush. A world of peace enclosed in lovely restful green.

He passed deeper into the forest, where the great beeches grew and paused in an avenue to contemplate that ancient beauty which had been his forefathers' and was now his. The century-old trees stood in aisles like mighty pillars propping up the green vaults of a vast church. The great

heads were reared incredibly far aloft ; gigantic arms, grey and patched with green, sprang out on high like power petrified. Here it was bare and silent : no birds, no flowers, only last year's leaves crackling on the fine grass springing up sparsely beneath the massive boles. A scene of grandeur, it reproached him, not the road to a mean enterprise. Almost he turned back, but impelled, reluctant, his footsteps sounded in procession through the warning forest—sounded as a mourner's over the dead leaves.

The forest stood back suddenly. The Summerhouse looked at him inquiringly from the stillness of a little clearing. Only the smaller trees grew here, a hawthorn or two, some young fruit trees, apple and pear, had been planted each side of the hut.

He had not seen it for years, not since Philip and he had been brought here for picnics. It was smaller than he remembered it, really rather a poor little place with its log walls filled with rubble and a low thatched roof. The porch, with seats either side, was overhung with creepers. He pushed in the door which he had counted on finding unlocked. Not much likelihood of anyone securing his property, he thought resentfully. But care had been shown over the interior. The low room where he and Philip had enjoyed their treat of wild strawberries and cream and quarrelled over the reddest apples and the switches Laporte had cut for them, was clean and in order. A sanded floor, white and green checked curtains in the little diamond-paned windows, green and white cushions on the three rush chairs. He had a fancy to open the old armoire—the very same set of pewter, a jug and some mugs and plates. Again reproachful sadness seemed to fill the quaint little room.

Those had been happy days ! No, they had not ; they had been bad—for both of them. They had led his brother to frustration and discontent and himself to isolation. I don't care, he consoled himself, I'll do fine things alone. I'll rise so high that those days will seem less than this paltry cottage !

He returned to the porch and stood looking out towards the forest path. She was nearly ten minutes late already. Confound her impudence ! She should have been the one to wait had he not feared that unpunctuality on his part might result in her departure before his arrival. . . . Fifteen minutes ! Perhaps she was not coming. Perhaps she had

consulted Fouquet and he had advised her to stay away. Chattering little bitch ! He imagined her in the attics of the Maids of Honour laughing with her companions over a royal dupe waiting in vain. He recalled how the Mancini girls had been used to deride unwanted admirers. The tale would be all over Fontainebleau. How Henriette would laugh and Philip sneer at the King's unsuccessful rendezvous at the unromantic hour of eight in the morning. He assured himself savagely that he didn't care a straw what any of them thought—he would do what he chose if the whole Court died of laughing. As for that La Vallière girl, she should be turned out of the Palace before she was much older ; he knew quite enough about her to warrant her expulsion.

He caught the sound of horse's hoofs—perhaps a forester, the occupant of the Summerhouse. A moment or two and someone came into view, cantering down the ride. He had never imagined her arriving on horseback. The picture which had kept him awake last night had been of a drawing-room figure, pale grey silk and golden curls falling on white shoulders, swaying in the dance, reticent, mysterious, unfathomed in spite of all his adverse judgments. This was a newcomer, a horsewoman in a fashionable habit of sapphire blue, a beaver with sky blue and pink feathers wreathed round it. He had to admit that she rode as well as she danced. She reined up smartly, was down in a moment, advancing, bridle in one hand, skirts gathered in the other, smiling gaily at sight of him as if she had not a care in the world.

Unsmiling, he raised his hat. " You'd better let me take your horse."

" Pray don't trouble, Sir ; he's restive with strangers. He knows me. We're friends."

He watched her hitch the reins to a hook in a staple set up for the purpose. She took her time, made sure all was secure ; patted the animal's neck, then turned to him with that young happy smile.

" I'm afraid I'm a little late."

" You're nearly twenty minutes late."

" Oh, not so much as that, surely," she dissented cheerfully.

He stood aside and motioned her to precede him into the little shaded room.

" Oh, what a dear little house," she cried.

" Please be seated, Mademoiselle."

He did not offer her a chair, and she looked round before choosing the rustic couch.

He drew up a seat for himself. The rush-covered table was between them ; leaning his arms on it and, bending forward, he surveyed her sitting there pulling off her gauntlets by the fingertips. She had dressed herself very finely for an early morning ride. The little modish coat, cut like a man's, was finished with a stiff lace cravat and cuffs to match, and a masculine shoulder-knot of pink and blue ribbons. It became her ; she looked less thin and younger than last night and much more animated—rather like a child acting the woman of fashion and excited by the game of dressing up.

A pretty picture, but he reminded himself of who had paid for that elegant outfit and hardened his heart.

He began by saying that he regretted to have brought her out at that early hour. His time was not his own.

"I love the early morning ; it was wonderful riding in the woods," she said.

"It was not possible to speak privately last night."

There was expectancy in her face now, as well as pleasure ; but if she imagined he was going to flirt with her, she made a mistake.

"I desire to obtain some information which you can give me."

Watching the arrest of the smile, he added coldly, "It will save us both trouble if you are quite frank."

The smile died out ; with satisfaction he saw it replaced by a surprised, a dubious look. She looked down at her ungloved hands (he noticed there was not a single ring on them), then up again.

He spoke authoritatively, "You will be good enough to understand that this conversation is not to be bruited abroad. On my part I give you my word that your name shall be kept out of it. I forbid you to talk about the affair to anyone, no matter whom. Is that quite clear ?"

Her lips moved, but no words came ; the face under the wide hat was downcast even more than taken aback.

"I understand that you came from Blois to Paris some three months ago with my cousins, Mlle d'Orléans—that you left them because they no longer required your services. Where did you go next, Mademoiselle ?"—it gave him a distinct satisfaction to add—"I'm afraid your name escapes me."

"Louise de la Vallière." The soft murmur reproached him. "Where did you go next, Mlle de la Vallière?" he repeated.

"I went to Mme de Choisy."

"Why did you not return to your family?"

She looked up. There was colour in her face now. "I prefer not to say."

He shrugged his shoulders. "As you will—it's not important. You are a lady of preferences. You preferred to stay in Paris. How long did you remain with Mme de Choisy?"

"I stayed with her until I went to the Palais Royal," she said nervously.

He was ill at ease himself. He hoped she was not making ready to cry. She looked pathetic, sitting there in her finery, making no attempt to hide her discomfort.

The effort to appear unmoved made his voice more than cold; it was sarcastic as he said, "*Mademoiselle, it is not usual for ladies without rank or influence to fill posts about the person of a Princess of the Blood Royal. It is remarkable that Mme de Choisy should appear to have found no difficulty in the matter. I desire to know who in truth procured your appointment.*" Then as she did not answer but still sat, head down, gazing at the gloves she held, he added sharply, "Well, who was it? You needn't be afraid to tell me!"

She spoke with reluctance. "I'd rather not say, but if I must—it was a lady of my acquaintance, Mme du Plessis."

He took his arms from the table and leaned back.

"Thank you. Did Mme du Plessis also purchase the appointment for you?"

Her astonished eyes looked at him. "I don't understand you."

He said roughly, "I think you do!"

She persisted. "I do *not* understand you, Sir."

He summoned a slighting laugh. "Perhaps you'll understand this more easily. What did they give you, or promise you, to go to the Palais Royal?"

Her cheeks were more than flushed—they were burning now. "Give me?—promise me? Why should they promise me anything?"

"Oh, don't tell me you were to get nothing besides your outfit."

"I am to have my appointments," she said in a bewildered upset voice. "A hundred and twenty pistoles yearly, they said it would be."

"That would scarce pay for that becoming habit I should imagine, Mademoiselle," and he pointed to the sapphire blue coat as if levelling an indictment of its elegance. "That charming habit, quite in the English mode. You are an heiress, then, Mlle de la Vallière, who thinks nothing of throwing away a hundred and fifteen pistoles for the latest fashion!"

At the insolent gesture, the insolent words, she got up. She was trembling, flushed, the dark blue eyes were brimming with tears.

"I have done nothing I am ashamed of. My clothes are paid for!" A proud quivering voice.

He got up also. "I don't doubt it! The question is, who paid for them?"

"That is not a question you have the right to ask!"

The young voice rang. The eyes still glistened, but she looked at him indignantly now.

"It's a question I am compelled to ask. I do not intend Madame's household shall harbour ladies whose reputation can be called in question."

She said, "There is nothing against my reputation. I will go now, please."

"I regret you cannot; not till you have answered my question."

She looked from him to the door—a look of consideration. He judged she was calculating her chances of escape. He felt, irritably, that he was mishandling the affair. He could not use force; if it came to that he would have to let her go. Why not let her go—with a last contemptuous word—and bid Colbert deal with her? Almost he said, "Go then, the sooner the better!" But the sight of her, close to him, struck the words from his lips. The face he had first seen as the perfect illustration of a lovely song was angry and averted now. He remembered the perfume of the pale gold hair, the light touch on his arm, the swift grace with which she had run the length of the ballroom, her hand in his, and he stood silenced by regret. Finish with her—all this loveliness to be lost since it was only the lure wherewith she had attracted the lust of an experienced profligate. Doubtless she had whetted Fouquet's jaded

appetite with that look of proud innocence, sold all the beauty which was hers for a wardrobe and a place at Court.

He had heard Brienne hold forth concerning the venality of women ; Philip could vie with him in scurrilous anecdotes ; both young men thought it sophisticated to make light of obscenity, but this girl made innocence unclean.

His lips opened for his dismissal of her. Instead he found himself crying out furiously :

"Here's your receipt ! Now go on lying about it !"

The paper fell on the table with the lightest rustle. To him it was as if he had thrown a stone. She stared at it, took it up, read it. She drew a breath he could hear. Crushing it in her hand, she ejaculated in an incredulous voice :

"This has been stolen from me !"

There was a moment's silence while she smoothed out the paper, looked at it again then folded it carefully in four.

She spoke quietly. "There's something strange about this—I don't understand how you come to have it. But I'll say nothing about M. Fouquet if you keep me here all day and all night !"

He said bitterly, "Oh not all night, surely ! It wouldn't do to keep the poor man waiting. That's not the way you treat a generous lover, is it ?"

A change came over her face. The angry look gave place to a still, closed expression. She picked up her gloves and straightened out the fingers one by one. She gave a sigh as of undefeated patience. He thought, "Nothing will make her speak ; she'll never admit it, never deny. That's her armour—to say nothing, always to say nothing."

And the next moment she spoke. "Is it possible that you should say a thing like that to me ? And they call you the First Gentleman in France ! Many a peasant could teach you courtesy ! Let me pass, please !"

He was as angry as she was. He forgot dignity, decency, common sense, everything except that she should not go out triumphant, despising him, with the last word.

Like a furious boy he shouted at her : "Do you know who you're talking to ?"

He received in return the measure of her scorn.

"Do I know ? I may be country bred and unable to pay my costs, but we were always for the King. My father held our town for him against his enemies—he never got the better

of his wounds. At home, when we stand up to pray for the King at Mass, our men grasp the handles of their swords. On your birthday"—she swallowed—"we used to hang out flags and make ropes of flowers, like Christmas. We thought the world of you! I'll never do it again! If you want the truth I'll tell it you. I was beside myself for joy when they told me I was to be Maid of Honour. When I saw you come in to the ball last night I thought, I'll remember this all my life. When you asked me to dance I couldn't find words to say how happy I was! But I'll never be so foolish again. You've taught me my mistake. I know what Kings are like now and the Palaces they live in, where people are rude and unkind and laugh at you because you're new and make mistakes. You've never had to read someone else to sleep when your eyes keep closing and the words slide up the page, and when you creep out at last, she wakes up and you have to begin all over again. I do my best but I'm tired out—but that's nothing—it's nothing at all compared with this!"

He cried out, "Wait!" But it was a straw against a torrent. She was not far from tears, but there was no faltering. The voice expressed the sincerity of a child protesting stoutly against disillusion too great to be borne.

"M. Fouquet's been a friend to me, and I won't bring him into this. I don't pretend to understand you, but I know you mean him no good, and I won't bring him into it."

She ceased to speak, her face set in patient disdain was turned towards the door.

He was still furious, though his anger had changed under her words. They had transformed the atmosphere, carried him to a world where village priests prayed for a beloved King and children hung up flowers, where plot and counter-plot and the determination to destroy a man did not exist. And the vision of her enslaved to Henriette's insomnia touched him. She had put him in the wrong, maddeningly so, but she was no courtesan, no intrigante. He had failed completely to understand this extraordinary, childlike, fearless person; he had only descended to an undignified loss of control. But his instinct to assert himself was stronger than his sense of shame; he burst out with heat:

"Will you listen to me? You ignorant girl, you set yourself up to judge things you can't possibly understand. I simply asked you to tell me something in confidence. You

don't know my motives, you don't need to. God's Death ! I don't have to explain myself to every chit of sixteen. I'm your Sovereign and years older than you ; I'm a man and you're a child. I know what I'm talking about and what danger you're running into. I'd save you if I could—but all you can do is to stand there and defy me ! ”

“ Are you going to arrest me ? ”

The transition from passion to absurdity was too sudden. He stared at her and burst into laughter.

“ I believe you're crazy—that's the only explanation. Do you suppose it's my business to arrest people ? You've been reading too many romances at Blois—I know how my cousins waste their time. I suppose you think a King has nothing better to do than run about the country throwing silly girls into dungeons and cutting off their heads ! ”

She said resentfully, “ I don't think anything about you at all ! ”

He seized on this. “ Oh, but you do—you've just stated at length what you think of me. You're quite unjust, but I'd despair of changing your opinion. I don't suppose you ever give a thought to anyone else's difficulties. I assure you it's not all honour and glory being the King. People don't run to do my will out of pure love and loyalty. You're a proof of that. They all want something, titles or office or money I haven't got, or just their own way like you do. I'm not a tyrant whatever you may think. I don't expect you to believe it, but I haven't signed a death warrant since the Cardinal died, and I've granted seven free pardons.” He broke off suddenly. “ I don't know why I'm saying all this to you, but you've no conception what my life is like.”

If she had complained as a child, this appeal, the effort to impress her, to show himself in the best light, was no less ingenuous.

She looked at him doubtfully and curiously too, but her voice was cold, “ I make no doubt but that you have your difficulties.”

He gave a rueful laugh. “ You're mighty kind ! ”

“ If you've nothing further to say to me, Sir, perhaps you will kindly permit me to pass. I need scarcely say,” she added, drawing on her gloves with an air of great dignity, “ that I shall quit the palace—resign my appointment as soon as possible.”

She moved to the door. He put his hand to the latch ;

the movement might have been equally to open or to keep it closed.

He said abruptly, "Why did you come?"

"You asked me to come." She did not take her eyes from the door.

He did not move his hand. "Why did you think I asked you?"

She returned with complete composure, "I was mistaken in you."

He said boldly, "No, it was I who was mistaken. I thought you might be concerned in an intrigue. I believed I had good reason, but you've satisfied me I was wrong. No man in his senses would employ *you* as a spy! You can keep a secret, I'll grant you that. Holy Blue! I doubt if wild horses would make you speak if you didn't mean to; but you've no insight—and not much tact," he added warmly. "Spies need both, so I take it back."

The apology was lamely made. Her forehead puckered into a little line of perplexity; something in her pose relaxed.

He went on desperately, "I've more insight than you have. I know why you came to meet me—you thought I admired you and that you'd have the laugh of the King. Something to amuse the other girls with," he ended bitterly.

She waited.

"Isn't that true? But I forgot—you don't answer questions! I'm wasting my time. I'll dare to ask you one more, though. Why did you smile at me last night? When I came in—when that Englishman was singing?"

She appeared to consider. After a quiet sigh as though her patience was fast coming to an end, "You smiled at me first!" she said, and do what she could to hold her lips firm, they parted.

"I did not." After which uncompromising contradiction he added with resignation, "The truth is we smiled at each other at the same moment. But have it your way. I smiled at you because I thought standing there you looked just like that lovely Sylvia in the song. I asked you to dance because I wanted to dance with you. I asked you to meet me here because I wanted to see you again. I was furious because I thought you belonged to someone else, and even now you won't put my mind at rest! Make the best or the worst of it—it's the truth! If you go now I'll never forget you. But don't

go, it's not late. Stay a few minutes—just to show you've forgiven my mistake."

To his surprise, to his delight, she made no demur. She sat down on the couch again. She let him kiss her hand and then her face. She let him put his arm round her, took off her grand hat, carefully, so that the plumes should not be crushed, and laid her head on his shoulder with the little contented sigh of one coming to rest.

She said with gentle derision, "M. Fouquet, of all people ! He's sixty, I should think—old enough to be my grandfather."

CHAPTER VII

PHILIP's indignation, somewhat cooled by a night's sleep, was rekindled by his brother's failure to keep his appointment in the morning. This, from one so ridiculously punctual could mean only one thing—a deliberate evasion. He left the King's apartments and the apologetic Laporte in a fury, and when a couple of hours later the culprit was announced as requesting an interview, received him with an icy dignity which should have warned that young man, entering in high spirits, that singing was out of place.

Cutting short an absurd excuse, something about a long walk, Monsieur opened his batteries with the zest of one whose wrath has been pent up for hours. He was only too well aware that his sensibilities, his dignity, counted for nothing. Last night should have proved that to him ; had he not hoped against hope for a lingering vestige of decency, not to say fraternal regard, he would not have consented to the interview his brother had himself requested. His forbearance had been repaid by an additional insult. He had been kept waiting to cool his heels like a lackey. Not a word of excuse left. No, he begged the King would not trouble to apologize.

The oration ceased abruptly ; Monsieur stared at the abstracted face across the table and lapsed into everyday speech :

"My God ! I swear you're not even listening !"

"My dear Philip! I beg your pardon. Will you repeat it?"

The request was granted with interest, Monsieur became incoherent with rage. He had had enough—more than enough. He might be only a younger brother, kept under from his very cradle. "Do you suppose I don't know why—for fear I might show *you* up in a poor light," he shrilled, thumping the table. "You were to be everything; I nothing. Do you suppose I don't know what that old devil of a Mazarin was up to, sending me out with the women to play at dolls while you were riding your new pony and handling a gun! Do you suppose I've forgotten, eh?"

Venomous, gesticulating, it was impossible not to pity him. To Louis it was also impossible to deplore the wrong and not start to remedy it. He was accustomed to Philip's complaints; but he had never complained so bitterly before.

He put his hand on his brother's arm, "Don't exaggerate, Phil. I didn't have all the advantages you are so sure about. I've had mighty little book education, no more than you. As for riding and shooting, it's a matter of practice. I'm tired of asking you to come out with me; you always refuse. As for office, I'd be grateful if you would help me; I need someone I could trust."

There was sincerity in the assertion. Philip might be aggravating and incalculable, but to his brother he was fundamentally above suspicion.

Philip shook off his hand. "A thousand thanks! I'm to work under you in one of your fine new councils, am I? I may be a fool, but I'll not make myself a laughing-stock for the whole of France. One in the family is enough for that. I don't want your damned patronage—I don't want anything from you—Ouf!" He paused for breath. The furious face was white now. He sat down and said in a thin, acid voice, "You can't prevent my being master in my own house, however. I'm taking my wife and household off to St. Cloud this afternoon, and you won't see us again in a hurry!"

He had the satisfaction of observing that this shot went home. His brother looked startled and distinctly upset. Gratified by the effect of his dramatic threat, Philip was enraged by what it implied. To Louis's, "You can't treat Henriette like that, Phil," he snarled, "Can't I? Whose wife is she, by God?"

For the first time he experienced genuine apprehension. Surely the relations between his brother and his wife were not serious, after all? And when Louis began to pace the room without an attempt to disguise his perturbation, when he repeated, "Think it over, don't do anything in a hurry, not to-day, that's all I ask," his uneasiness increased. Dropping all affectation, he seized his brother's arm, and, threatening the worried face and yet entreating it, said, "Don't tell me you're as fond of her as all that?"

The two stared at each other. It was Louis who first woke to the full implication of the misunderstanding. The pathos of the inquiry spoke for itself, and demanded to be undeceived. Emphatically he tried to convince the unfortunate before him. Henriette was a charming girl, a wife any man might be proud of. "I admire her mightily, who doesn't? But as for anything else—ridiculous. I don't think of her in that way; nor she of me, I assure you," he added with belated chivalry.

"But you object to her departure, nevertheless!"

It seemed that Louis had all manner of objections. Their mother's feelings; the scandal such an extreme step would create, the indignity to Minette. At this last Philip remounted his high horse. It was rather late in the day to think of Henriette's reputation. A husband was the best judge of what was proper for his wife. As soon as the King would do him the favour of terminating this unpleasant interview he would give his orders to his people.

He was astonished to behold his brother, usually so exasperatingly self-controlled stamp his foot and ejaculate, "It's just a damned lie, I tell you. If you must know, I'm in love with someone else, you fool."

"Then what is it to you whether we go or stay?"

The other stared angrily at him. He hated to yield his confidence, he detested talking at the best of times, but in his brother he relied on the equality of birth, of code; he largely comprehended his weakness, excused and loved him. "My dear fellow," he began weightily, and with a secret thrill at the importance of the disclosure he was still half-reluctant to make, "I am going to confide in you; you must give me your word it goes no further. It's like this—if you go, you'll take the person I'm fond of with you." Fortunately the ambiguity of this declaration did not occur to Philip. His face brightened with malicious

delight. A titter of incredulous amusement escaped him :

"Oh, ye blessed saints keep me ! It's true, then, what people were trying to tell me last night and I wouldn't believe it. Lorraine offered me 100 pistoles to one against, and I didn't take it ! That girl you asked to dance ! Don't tell me it's that girl, Lou ; I couldn't survive it. Palsambleu ! A hundred to one !" he repeated regretfully.

The expression of the other's face removed his last doubts. Its offended dignity appeared to him so comic that he shook with an hilarity heightened by relief. Between gasps he ejaculated, "Just like you ! A girl like that ! What's her name ? Fouquet's girl—whatever is her name ?"

His brother made a dash at him. "Hold your beastly tongue, will you ? God's Death ! If that foul Lorraine so much as dares mention her—— !" He broke off, conscious that this was scarcely the way to enlist his brother's sympathy. "You'll do me the favour to give the lie to any such reports ; it might be most injurious to her," he ended stiffly and feebly. But Philip was not offended. To relief at the groundlessness of his suspicions was added delight at being first in possession of this exciting secret.

"Injurious !" he scoffed, but quite pleasantly, from the window-seat where he sprawled in happy abandonment. "It's promotion for her, isn't it ? One would think you'd been reared in a monastery, Lou. The only injury your flame is likely to receive is a bodkin in the ribs from my sweet little wife. Henriette'll have something to say to this —Vallière," he found it triumphantly. "That's the name ! Tall, scraggy girl like a tree. Vallière, Holy Blue !" he chuckled gleefully. "To think of your running after a girl like that ! Be a good fellow, Louis, and tell me all about it."

But Louis was disappointingly uncommunicative. Not even a flare-up at the disparagement of his lady's looks. What a lover ! Philip felt quite affectionately towards his brother for providing such a rare opportunity of scoring off Henriette. How she would resent finding herself supplanted by her insignificant attendant. He regretted the promise which would debar him from being the bearer of the glad tidings. It would have been rich to watch the disdainful little face encounter defeat. What was Louis meandering about now ?

"... Tired out. Henriette keeps the poor child out of bed half the night."

He woke up to let fly the irresistible dig : " Half the night, eh, and you the other half? No wonder the poor girl looks washed-out."

" You've a foul imagination," protested the indignant elder. " She's not that sort of girl, I tell you. It's shocking to think of her subjected to the disgusting chatter of you and your cronies. Haven't you the decency to understand what I'm asking you? She's unfairly treated—doubtless Henriette doesn't appreciate it. All the women in our family are alike, think only of themselves. Marie-Thérèse thinks nothing of hauling her old nurse out of bed if her little finger aches. But she's not seventeen yet ; she must have her night's rest. Stop sniggering, will you, Philip ? " he ended passionately.

Monsieur laid a not unkindly hand on his brother's shoulder. " Poor old Louis, you've got the fever badly. I don't doubt your divinity has all the perfections. As for keeping her out of bed," he bit down a mischievous lip, " leave that to me. I'll settle that trifling matter with Henriette without giving you away. Finesse with the gentler sex, my dear—finesse. Leave it to me. But whatever you do, Louis, keep this from Mam-ma "—he lisped the word with the mischievous imitation of a child—" I don't want to scare you, Lou, but if this gets abroad it'll mean no end of trouble for you—and for all of us," he added with sudden genuine misgiving. " Our mother, Minette, your wife, every woman in the family will have their knives out for your lady. 'Pon my soul, I begin to pity that poor Mlle le Peuplier, or whatever you call her."

In her bedroom, one of the finest at Fontainebleau, in the centre of the huge canopied bed, all the pillows piled behind her, nibbling at a box of delicious sugared violets only procurable at one special booth on the Pont Neuf, Henriette made believe to settle herself to be read to sleep. Framed in a night-cap of cobweb lace, her thin oval face washed pale of rouge looked as nature made it—plain, sallow, and full of energy and intelligence. She had danced through a two-hours' ballet, she had laughed, and chattered incessantly for at least three hours more, but sleep was far from her. The life she had led since her marriage was not conducive to the habit of repose. For three months past she had turned night into day, flirted, played feverishly, in her attempt to

find compensation for homesickness and a disappointing marriage in one exciting friendship.

She was genuinely attracted to Louis ; by his gravity, his common sense, his solid masculine good looks, by everything Philip had not. Her flirtation meant much to her. Her brother-in-law's inexplicable indifference of the past twenty-four hours wounded as much as it humiliated. She told herself that Philip's public outbreak could be the only cause ; and such caution, however disappointing, was at least an endurable explanation. But if the reason lay elsewhere ? She dropped a disparaging glance at the girl sitting on her stool by the bedside. A poor creature, not pretty. Too tall, really nothing attractive about her, reading in that precious affected voice :

*"But hearts which change seek not old passions in a gay return,
Therefore I choose not you, loving you still,
For that old love was best for that old time."*

"Pray put a little feeling into it, Mademoiselle. 'Tis a poem not a sermon," but the stupid girl only answered that she read evenly like that to lull Madame to sleep more quickly. Sleep, with her nerves all jangled ! Now the wretch was actually yawning.

"I can't conceive how you contrive to feel so fatigued," she snapped, "you were abroad all morning, I understand." Henriette glanced sharply at a face, flushed, but not with the shame becoming an inferior. In an equal it might have seemed an indignant—almost a triumphant—face. M. Fouquet or not, something would have to be done with such an ill-bred young woman. Henriette folded her hands on the violet satin bed-cover—what pretty hands they were, one of her best points—that girl's hands were much larger, and those pale untinted nails— ! She jumped.

In the doorway, at the far end of the long candle-lit room, stood a figure in a scarlet dressing-gown, a scarlet cap with a long gold tassel. Philip fluttered the gold and turquoise folds of an immense Chinese fan, making the most of a dramatic entrance. The quick dark eyes, circled with kohl looked enormous in the powdered, carmined face, as they darted from one girl to the other.

"Good evening, or should I rather say, good morning, fair ladies ? Don't rise, Mlle—de la Vallière, isn't it ? Or

rather, pray do. I'd be desolated to have you think me ungallant ; at any other hour, dear young lady, your company would be a delight. But not at two in the morning, dear Mademoiselle, when a weary man, and a good husband, is dying to get to his bed." He shook a reproachful head, and smiling gently at his wife's furious face, minced slowly down the room. After a low circular bow including both women, he seated himself on the end of the bed. With an air of enjoyment he kicked off his high-heeled slippers. "One, two, buckle my shoe ! What charming little ditties you English have ! How hot you look, my dear Minette ; I trust you're not sickening for the fever. You overdo things, my Love ; I vow you do, indeed you do. Good night, Mlle—de la Vallière," a long thin naked foot pointed, "take the love lyrics with you. *We* shan't need them, shall we, my dear ? Oh Mademoiselle, one moment—he snapped his fingers at a sudden vexation—"Tch !"

The girl, who had risen and stood embarrassed, hesitated.

"Will you do me a kindness ? My poor little love-bird—you'll find him in my study, on the left just round the corner. I quite forgot to cover him up for the night. I always cover his cage myself, make a point of it. He's like Madame, my sweet little love-bird is, he can't get to sleep easily. He wants tucking up and kissing good night. Be sure you only kiss him through the bars, don't let him out. Here's his little blanket." He produced a square of light green damask and extended it gracefully, and with a solemn wink. "A thousand thanks, Mademoiselle. Don't stay long with the little pet. It's time he was asleep, and you too. Good night. Sweet dreams."

CHAPTER VIII

M. JEAN BAPTISTE COLBERT was a man of many activities. Administrator of the Cardinal's household and domains, his duties had ranged from the appropriation of vast tracts in the Colonies of New France, to the purchase of a bathing hut on the Seine for the amusement of his Eminence's nieces ; from the most profitable investment of millions to the remittance of Mlle Marianne's pocket money. He had despatched two pistoles—no more, no less—on the first

of every month to her Convent School with the same regularity with which he discharged the most imposing commitments. He chose Monseigneur's lambswool slippers, he bought his New Year gifts for the Pope, the King of Spain, even those destined for Queen Anne and her sons. He purchased good articles at the lowest possible prices. Everything he undertook was carried out thoroughly and, surprising in so apparently phlegmatic a man, with considerable imagination and taste.

M. Colbert worked hard—a twelve-hour day. Wits among his acquaintance would protest their inability to understand how this industrious little man had found time to father a round dozen of healthy children. Mme Colbert was sometimes pitied by her friends. All those great boys and girls on her hands and a husband out of the house from morning till night.

Commiseration was unnecessary; Madame understood her Jean Baptiste perfectly. A complete accord existed between them. Their interests, their ambitions were one. A good pensioned appointment, a tidy sum laid by against retirement, an excellent education and a good start in life for children beginning where their parents left off. The wife admired her husband above all men, and in his mute, take-it-for-granted habit, he thought the world of his help-meet.

Not without reason. Marie-Geneviève Colbert was a devoted wife, a fond mother, a most capable and economical housewife. Moreover, as became an heiress in a small way, the only daughter of a Breton Councillor, a match considerably above the reasonable expectations of young Colbert, the lawyer's clerk of twenty years ago, she was quite equal to rising in the world with dignity.

Her husband's transfer from the supervision of the affairs of his Eminence to the Bureau des Finances was at first somewhat mistrusted by Mme Colbert. True His Majesty had kindly arranged that the emoluments were no less—but she considered the position of a subordinate—an important subordinate no doubt, but still a subordinate—was derogatory to one who had been to all intents and purposes his own master. A single office, no matter how important, gave insufficient scope for a man of her husband's talents. The good wife worried at times lest his health should suffer from the confinement and monotony his new duties entailed.

With the late Cardinal there had always been diversions of one sort or another. Trips to Lyons and Brouage, on which occasionally she had accompanied him—all sorts of pleasant little excursions.

However, the new Intendant of Finance bore up bravely. He was as active, as cheerful over the new job as ever he had been over the old, thought his better half, listening to him whistling at intervals during his early morning shaving.

He always shaved himself. By candlelight nine months of the year, his wife reflected with compunction from the warm depths of a huge feather-bed, two blessed hours before her in which to enjoy its solitary comfort.

Watching him thus engaged at six o'clock on a certain August morning, she inquired sleepily, "Why don't you get a valet, my dear? People in our position always keep a valet."

Her husband, in his home-made shirt of good holland, stitched and frilled by her own hands, his none too abundant greying hair hanging lankly over it, grumbled about a pack of lazy knaves, apcing the gentleman. He had shaved himself since there had been anything to shave.

"You make me feel extravagant to have engaged a maid for the girls," she said; to which he answered as he had answered a hundred times before:

"Nonsense—you know I don't grudge you anything. No need for you to do a hand's turn if you don't want to or the girls, either. Talking of girls——" he added, wiping the lather carefully from his chin.

Talking of girls, he desired his wife to prepare for the arrival of a visitor—the day after to-morrow—a young woman. The best spare bed-chamber should be made ready. It was only for one night. He turned to the woman sitting up astonished from her pillows, his clean razed face wore a worried expression.

A matter of business—not altogether pleasant business. The young person was from the Court. She would be arriving from Fontainebleau. It was only for the one night the husband was thankful to say.

"I don't know much about her, better not let her have anything to do with the daughters. Perhaps it would be as well to send them over to your Mother's. I don't know much about her," he repeated.

The mystified wife asked a few natural questions. She learned that the undesired guest was a Mlle de la Vallière,

one of those Maids of Honour. It seemed she had no friends in Paris.

Mme Colbert spoke out of her knowledge of her husband.

"I suppose you're doing this to oblige an acquaintance. Rather an extraordinary thing to ask, isn't it? It isn't M. Fouquet, I hope. Because if so, Jean Baptiste, even if he is your chief, I don't think we ought to let ourselves be mixed up in it—really!"

Her husband cut her short. It was not to be thought that he would bring a fancy woman of that Fouquet's to their home. He had been ordered to keep it secret but, as his wife knew, he never had any secrets from her. He didn't like the idea, he'd have said no if he could, but it was impossible to refuse the King.

"My God," exclaimed Mme Colbert; she was wide awake now, all thoughts of a further snooze forgotten. "You don't mean to tell me, dear heart, that our young King—"

Speaking with the delicacy due to a respectable married woman, the mother of young daughters, he said unfortunately that was just what he did mean to tell her. He stressed his own reluctance to admit one no better than she should be to the home of a virtuous family, but his wife knew as well as he did that one had to look after one's own interests; one could not risk offending the King. It would be necessary to treat the young person with the utmost consideration.

"Don't breathe a word to your mother—His Majesty made a great point of my discretion. Anyone would think he was conferring the Order of the Holy Ghost on me," complained M. Colbert with feeling. "I'd have told him to look for a pander elsewhere if I'd dared."

"The girls shall go to my mother directly after breakfast," declared his wife, springing out of bed with excited determination. "I suppose the boys will be quite safe—they're not likely to notice anything, are they? Anyway, they can sup in the schoolroom for once."

Two days later, in the afternoon, M. Colbert alighted from a travelling coach and handed out a fashionable young lady. The hostess waited in the big square entrance hall, supported by her companion, a poor relation of her own, a woman of uncertain years and unimpeachable morality.

The young person of dubious character advanced on M. Colbert's reluctant arm, returned the uncomfortable

curtsies of the two ladies with a bend in the new English manner, and offered a handshake also in the affected foreign style. After which, she gave them each a shy smile and said nervously that it was mighty kind of Mme Colbert to accommodate a stranger.

Upstairs in the guest chamber, the best one, scoured and polished to perfection, lavender sheets and the finest lace pillows and a truly magnificent bed-quilt especially borrowed from Mme Colbert's lady mother, the hostess was surprised to see what a very young lady the stranger was. Hood and cloak laid aside, she looked a child—younger than their Marie Christine. She seemed quite a simple creature too—not in the least the affected Court lady—saying how kind M. Colbert had been on the journey and admiring the fine quilt and the best room.

Mme Colbert, not an undiscerning woman and a kind-hearted one, began to think her husband must have made a mistake. This little thing—Mlle de la Vallière was at least three inches taller than her hostess—couldn't be anyone's light woman. You can easily tell that sort, opined Madame, but there, a good-living man like her Jean Baptiste couldn't be expected to know.

Down in the large salon, where a dozen solid chairs were stripped of their starched linen shrouds to impress the visitor with their grand crimson brocade (the taste acquired and exercised in his patron's interest was alien to M. Colbert and did not influence his home), tea was served in the fashionable English manner and sipped by the hostess out of politeness.

Over the tea Mme Colbert's favourable impression was confirmed. Ridiculous to think evil of this young thing, seventeen at the most, sitting there in a simple afternoon gown of mauve lawn patterned with rosebuds. A little shy, perhaps, as became one of her years speaking for the first time to an older woman, her hostess, but behaving with the simple good manners which carried the Town Councillor's daughter back to her girlhood's home.

Madame made a few polite inquiries. She learned that Mademoiselle's mother lived at Blois, that her only brother was in Paris, that her father was dead, that she had been educated in a convent in Tours. The ladies were on common ground here, they exchanged friendly anecdotes of the good sisters.

Presently Madame introduced the exciting topic of the Court. She supposed there were mighty fine doings at Fontainebleau? Mademoiselle agreed that everything there was very grand indeed. Pressed, a little more at home now, she delighted the home-keeping woman with an account of the magnificent Fête at Vaux, which M. Fouquet had recently offered to the King. The whole Court had been bidden to it; there had been over six hundred guests! Yes, it was unfortunate that the young Queen had not been in health to be present, but everything had been wonderful. Fountains, fireworks, music, ballet, banquets. Everyone had received presents, the most lovely presents! "This is mine," the Maid of Honour held up her curls to display ear-rings of gold filigree set with emeralds. "Aren't they beautiful, Madame? Wasn't it generous of M. Fouquet?"

Madame Colbert agreed—a qualified agreement. It must be remembered that M. Colbert had no secrets from his wife. But she was entranced, listening to tales of high life and amusements. She noted, too, that there was nothing one could object to in the girl's stories. No malicious pleasantries and certainly nothing in the least dubious. Merely interesting accounts of the doings of grand folk and of how the Maids of Honour passed their days; they seemed to have plenty to do.

She could have listened for ever had not the visitor, on the striking of a clock, asked at what hour supper was served. She had a call to make in Paris. Supper was at eight; it was now six. If Madame would excuse her she would set out at once. She would be back in an hour.

Madame Colbert was taken aback. Her husband had said nothing of this. But he had returned to his office, and she had no authority to restrict the girl's movements. So she merely offered to send her demoiselle with her young guest and, on the courteous refusal of this offer, went to order the carriage with a thrill of pride in the fine new coach whose purchase had been so timely.

"Where shall I tell the man, my dear?" said the in-curious lady hostess.

"Rue Croix des Petits Champs," said Louise, without the least hesitation.

Madame Colbert experienced a return of her misgivings. The street wherein Nicolas Fouquet's magnificent house outshone its neighbours!

Its magnificence took her breath away. In her seventeen years she had lived in many houses. Untidy, shabby homes in Tours and Amboise; her convent school—bare, cold and scrupulously neat; the Castle at Blois—old-fashioned and inconvenient; her god-mother's house where all the best furniture was on show for strangers and the attic bedroom allotted to a poor relation destitute of comfort. She had thought the Palais Royal a fine place, Fontainebleau finer, but the home of her benefactor, M. Fouquet, made them seem heavy, and tasteless by comparison.

She was ignorant of art and furniture, but she felt that here was the expression of distinguished taste, something money only could not buy, and yet a home, lived in and beloved.

M. le Surintendant was from home, but his return was expected every moment. Louise was shown into an elegant drawing-room where half a dozen visitors were entertaining each other in the absence of the host.

The Maid of Honour, shy at this entrance among strangers, was glad to recognize a friend. The kind lady who had taken her shopping in Paris rose from a table where she was presiding over refreshments.

"Why here is my little Mademoiselle de la Vallière," welcomed Mme du Plessis. "I thought you at Fontainebleau, my dear. What has brought you to Paris?"

Introductions ensued. Mme de la Fayette, Mme de Sévigné, M. de Pomponne. Two gentlemen standing together in the background were the Cavalier Bernini and Lieutenant-Général de Bellefonds. Louise made her curtsies. These smiling, and to her, important middle-aged people appeared delighted to meet her. Mme du Plessis placed her at her side. M. de Pomponne handed wine and fruit. The three ladies made encouraging conversation with this child, one of the suite of the new Madame. They were kindly, but not greatly interested. The Surintendant's circle considered itself superior to the immature Court. Old Frondeurs for the most part, all of them intellectuals, they had never ceased from despising Mazarin as an upstart, Queen Anne as his dupe.

As to the new, the very new, régime, they were incapable of reading the signs of the times. The rising generation of royalty had little importance in their eyes. Philip was an effeminate boy, the frivolities of Henriette not in good taste.

The best one could hope for the King, brought up by two foreigners as he had been, was that he would have the sense to leave affairs in the hands of Nicolas Fouquet, as, to do him justice, he appeared to be doing. If this pretty, simple-looking girl had any interest for the complacent company gathered in the Surintendant's drawing-room, it was as their host's protégée rather than as the nobody from Tours, who, someone had said, had been singled out by King Louis at a ball at Fontainebleau, and whom he was reported to have sought once or twice since at Vaux. The King had given evidence of no noteworthy capacity; let him amuse himself with his ballets and hunting, and with as many little Maids of Honour as he pleased, so long as he left government and the disposal of offices to heads older and wiser than his own. M. Fouquet's friends, their polite duty done, left Mlle de la Vallière to enjoy her sweetmeats and returned to the interesting conversation her arrival had interrupted.

The Cavalière Bernini had written a book, an account of his travels, the manuscript was going the rounds of admiring readers. Lieutenant-Général de Bellefonds had won his race against M. le Grand a few days before, three leagues in the Bois de Vincennes. M. Fouquet had put his money on the Général, his friends likewise, and, as usual, the great man's luck had held. Thanks to him everyone had won something.

The host entered during this congratulatory discussion. His admirers hastened to welcome him. The ladies fussed round him with enthusiasm, the gentlemen approached deferentially. M. Fouquet had a word for each. For Mlle de la Vallière he had more. He kissed her hand and told her he was delighted to see her. He turned to the winner of the famous race, "Ah, de Bellefonds, here is a lady you will be glad to know. Mademoiselle is a first-rate horse-woman. If you were so bold as to challenge her, I know where my wager would be laid."

The man addressed, in the early forties, of medium height, medium build, a medium complexion marked lightly with small-pox, of whom his best friend was reported to have said, "Remarkable for a complete mediocrity!" did not rise to the occasion.

M. Fouquet pausing instinctively for the expected compliment was mildly surprised. The Lieutenant-Général appeared to have nothing to say, but the Surintendant,

marking Mlle de la Vallière's blush, bent his head to receive a low-voiced explanation of her visit, and was not further concerned with the unenterprising de Bellefonds. The young lady desired to speak with him for a moment, on business. M. Fouquet gave her his arm, made his excuses to his other guests and took her to his study.

This was a truly beautiful room. Louise, despite her nervous pre-occupation, could not fail to admire the lovely objects it held.

One small rug on the shining parquet, a masterpiece from Bokhara. A tall Dutch cabinet in scarlet lacquer, patterned with pagodas, quaint boats, wise ibis and storks winging their way across a red sky. Between the two long windows a desk in pale wood, brightened with designs in many coloured marquetry. Near it on a pedestal an Eros, half life size, stood poised to take flight. He lived; the alabaster limbs gleamed transparent as young flesh; in a moment he would be in the air, she thought. A long ebony table with silver and ivory inlay, stood against a wall supporting a crystal bowl of red roses. Little else except two pictures. A portrait of a beautiful naked woman and an Annunciation by Memling, a Virgin Mother among stiff white lilies bending a wise, inscrutable gaze on the room and the occupants.

If M. Fouquet was surprised by this visit from a young friend so unexpectedly in Paris, he did not show it. His manner was warm and flattering. His wife was still at Vaux, otherwise she would have had great pleasure in renewing the acquaintance of Mlle de la Vallière.

"M. Fouquet," began the visitor, colouring as she spoke, and taking something from a purse she carried. "First, may I repay my debt to you?"

He ran his eyes over the strip of paper. He had handled thousands such. An order on the Treasury. Made out for the amount of the dressmaker's bill he had discharged for her. The exact amount, down to the last franc.

He raised his eyes from it to the flushed, candid face.

"The cover is marked for the attention of M. Colbert," he remarked with careful carelessness.

"I thought it would be the same if I gave it direct to you. That it would be as good as the money. Perhaps I am wrong; I don't really understand money matters."

The Surintendant of Finance assured her that it would be

exactly the same. The draft was payable to bearer, and was quite in order. But there was not the slightest hurry for reimbursement of that trifling loan—he had forgotten it. Would it not perhaps be more convenient to leave it for awhile?

She was gently emphatic. "It belongs to you, please accept it. I want to ask you another favour," she hurried on. "Do you remember saying I should come to you if ever I found myself in difficulty?"

He remembered perfectly. He would be honoured to be of the slightest service. That beautiful room had often served as confessional. The priest of Venus, enslaved to women in proportion to their charm, had listened to the secrets of many a beauty from this very chair. He prepared himself for the disclosure on which it should be simple to advise her.

She gave the handsome, sensual face an appealing smile.

"I need some money—for my brother. He has an embarrassment, all the more unfortunate, since he has just received his Commission. He has lost at play, rather a large sum, I fear. It is very foolish of him, but I know he did not intend to be dishonest. He is only eighteen, and not accustomed to cards."

She held out the emerald ear-rings.

"Your lovely gift—I hate to ask you—it seems ungracious—but would you be offended if I begged you to take them back." She ended with undisguised effort, "And give me one hundred pistoles instead?"

If the Surintendant was surprised, was disappointed at the nature of the confidence, he was also touched. Of course she should have that trifling sum immediately, and as much more as she required. But he entreated her not to dream of returning his gift. That would really wound him.

He added in his most courtly tone, "A charming woman, Mademoiselle, should never have to worry about money—wretched subject! Let us talk of something more pleasant. What has brought Mlle de la Vallière to town? I trust Mme de Choisy is in good health?"

He was surprised and disturbed to learn the name of her hosts and that she was in Paris for one night only. He decided on a paternal solicitude.

"And you return to Fontainebleau to-morrow? I fear that will be mighty fatiguing for you, my dear child."

He watched her flush up again. "I'm going into the country for a few days—with a friend."

"So that's how it is!" thought the Surintendant. Aloud he said that would be delightful. The countryside was at its best just now. He would look to the pleasure of seeing her at the Palais Royal after her holiday. The Court would be returning to Paris very shortly, he understood.

His thoughts were active during the next few moments, while he showed her some rare books, his Eros, his Virgin, (omitting his Venus asleep), while she bent her face over his roses and said how beautiful they were, but he had made up his mind when after taking a handsome embroidered purse from the desk, gently checking her expressions of gratitude, he said how glad, how very glad he was that she had come to him; he trusted she would never hesitate to come to him at any time.

It was with the relief of decision that, appraising with experienced eyes, the youthful figure in the pretty summer gown, the curls escaping from the fashionable big straw hat, the happy, grateful face, he went on carelessly,

"I wonder if I might ask a favour of you, my dear child."

Of course he might—anything!

"I've my own little difficulties," he said with the air of one at once stating and deriding a fact.

She looked at this man of the world, the omnipotent patron who had played Providence to her; her first friend; and she saw him suddenly with new eyes. As he sat there, elegant in his thin, plum-coloured silks, his face, beneath the dark, imposing wig, showed signs of strain; the eyes were anxious. She saw him for the first time as unhappy, and her heart, full of its secret joy, went out to him.

"I'm in a dilemma too," he went on, with the same air of forced lightness. "I'm also thinking of selling something—an Office I hold."

"Oh, if you are in difficulties too," she broke in with warm remorse. "I shouldn't have bothered you."

She held out the fine purse. He pushed it back gently. His smile was very kind. "My dear young lady, you misunderstand me. It's not the money that is in question. Naturally, I could do with it—none of us can afford to despise a couple of million francs."

"A couple of million!" she repeated in an awe-struck tone, but he perceived that such a figure meant nothing to her.

"I don't care a fig about the money, one way or the other. I'm asking myself whether it would be wise to sell. I don't know what to do," he ended in a soft, troubled voice and looking at her with worried eyes.

Leaning forward in her chair she touched his arm.

"Poor M. Fouquet—do tell me how I can help you."

For an instant he laid his own hand on hers resting on his dark sleeve. The fingers Louis had branded as unclean patted the thin young hand gently. He looked towards the guileless face and once again, in the midst of his own perplexities, his heart reproached him.

During his sojourn at Fontainebleau he had watched her carefully. Since his departure he had caused others to watch and report. He knew how many or rather how few opportunities she had had for improving her friendship with the King. He knew how Henriette's jealousy had kept the young Maid of Honour in ceaseless attendance, how straitly Mme de Navaille the *gouvernante*, had kept her in charge. On the other hand he was aware that in the comparative liberty of this crowded house-party the lovers had managed to exchange notes; that unconsciously they owed a few minutes together to his own diplomatic contriving. He marvelled at Louis's timidity in the affair. Certainly he had not fulfilled the Surintendant's fear of a crude, brutal seduction. But such miserable lack of enterprise was pretty well as bad. Had the young cub water in his veins? Giving no protection to the girl, making out his draft for the dress-maker's bill to the odd franc, allowing her to apply to another man for a beggarly hundred pistoles!

He judged it unlikely that Louise de la Vallière could be as yet the King's mistress, but he thought it impossible that, given to-morrow, she could escape her fate. For a moment he forgot his own problems, and the uneasiness with which he had learned of Colbert as the royal confidant, in the impulse to warn her. Don't go with him. There's nothing in this to bring you any happiness. Only suffering can come of it for a girl like you. Reflect while there's time. He was urged to befriend her—to send her home—to send her anywhere to save her from disaster.

He was tempted; but the recollection of his own position prevailed. He dared not risk opposing the King. (It never occurred to him that he had injured this same man without hesitation a hundred times before.) His moment passed.

"I've no right to bother you with my wretched troubles."
"But why not? Look what you've done for me! I'd be so happy if I could do the least little thing."

Again he was unable to meet her eyes. He had to compel himself to say:

"If you could—if it wouldn't trouble you—if the occasion should offer to put in a good word for me with the King." Still afraid of her face, he hurried on, "I sometimes ask myself—I don't know why—if the King is against me."

"Oh, I don't think that," she murmured unhappily. "Why should he be against you?"

"There's no reason at all. I've always been loyal to His Majesty. When he was a child—all through the Fronde—I've never sided with his enemies as many did who are now in high favour," he finished with heat.

"He knows you were loyal," she said unexpectedly. "I have heard him mention it."

He stared at her in his relief. "I'm glad to hear you say that. It removes a load from my mind. I'd do anything in my power to please the King. If I knew it was his pleasure that I should sell this office, relinquish the post of Procureur-Général, I'd not hesitate a day. But once done, I don't want to find that the step does not meet with his approval."

She looked puzzled. "Why not ask him yourself, dear M. Fouquet? Wouldn't that be best?"

He could afford a smile now for the concerned, friendly face.

"I fear that wouldn't be possible—a direct approach—against etiquette, my dear. But if you could perhaps ascertain for me. It would be wiser not to mention our little talk. I can't tell you how grateful I'd be. I assure you it would more than repay any trifling service I've been happy to do you," he ended still with that embarrassed smile.

She returned it with one of affectionate reassurance.

"I'll do my best. But please make it plain to me. Exactly what do you want to know? I don't understand business."

He explained. It appeared to her quite a simple matter. The King, it seemed, was bent on reorganizing the Parlement, on appointing new members. It had been suggested to M. Fouquet that His Majesty disapproved of anyone holding more than one prominent office in the State.

"Of course I can't resign the Surintendance," he said,

laughing as at an absurdity. "That's out of the question, but as for my other office of Procureur-Général, I've had an offer already, but I don't altogether trust the party in question." He was moved to confide in her further. "M. le Tellier," he said, "perhaps you are acquainted with him."

"Only by name. I know very few people."

At the end of his explanation he again impressed on her the importance of keeping his request a secret. "The King might be displeased if he thought I'd been indiscreet. It's important to keep in His Majesty's good graces; there's a lot of jealousy in politics."

Louise nodded sagely. "There's jealousy everywhere at Court," she agreed.

When she rose to take her leave he begged her to accept a few of his roses and showed her out with the deference due to a princess. There, in the entrance hall, protesting glumly against the suave refusal of a disdainful footman to interrupt his master with his lady visitor, stood a short, common-place figure in inelegant brown, a man holding a homely black bag under one arm and an unfashionable hat in his hand.

M. le Surintendant did not lose a whit of his distinguished composure.

"Why here is our worthy M. Colbert. We were speaking of you, my good sir. You and Madame are fortunate hosts, I learn."

M. Colbert, twisting the brim of his hat and looking carefully about him, might have been a broker making an inventory of the costly furnishing. His restless little eyes, however, did not include the elegant figure of his Chief nor the young lady he escorted. He was heard to say he had no wish to intrude; he had thought he would come to take Mademoiselle home when she was ready to leave.

Easy, condescendingly polite to an absurd Second-in-command, M. Fouquet praised this concern. He, himself, had been about to accompany Mademoiselle, but her host's forethought would deprive him of that pleasure.

"I thought she being a stranger to Paris I'd do well to come for her," muttered the solicitous host.

Fouquet lifted his eyebrows. Louise de la Vallière had nothing to say. While the two men exchanged their few words she remained on Fouquet's arm, holding his roses against her breast.

M. Colbert gloomily declining a glass of wine, the Surin-

tendant led the lady to the carriage, the respectable man who had come to fetch her following humbly after.

In parting, Fouquet experienced a return of that pang of conscience. The loose-living man, the robber of millions, felt the utmost repugnance at relinquishing an unimportant girl to this virtuous father of a family. Gazing at the thick-set figure climbing in after her, his hands itched to grasp him by the unfashionable coat collar and fling him into the gutter. He hated this fellow ; he hated the man who had selected the uncouth guardian for a fine, delicate creature. Most of all he despised himself, that he had abandoned her without an effort—not from cowardice, not from indifference but simply for his own interests.

Back in his study he tossed off a couple of glasses. A third. That was better. He had nearly let his heart run away with his head. He was too soft where women were concerned. He felt better now, more sure of himself. He was thinking too much of this Louise de la Vallière !

But he continued to think of her, staring at the accusing chair where she had sat, had begged for her brother, had promised to help himself. One in a million. "If I'd been lucky enough to meet a girl like that when I was a young fellow, I'd have been a different man."

It was a blessing for the poor child that she was able to fancy herself in love. She hadn't an idea what a real lover could be like, he thought pityingly. He felt bitter that a crude, insensitive young boor who already possessed everything that life could offer, should have acquired, for nothing, a gift beyond price.

Sighing, the man who had left his young second wife at Vaux, went back to rejoin his mistress and her circle.

In the privacy of the comfortable four-post bed, Madame Colbert informed her spouse that really she did not know what to think ! She expatiated on the theme of her misgivings to the unresponsive back of a man who grumbled that he wanted to go to sleep after a long day.

Granted it was a queer thing for a decent girl to do—going off unchaperoned to that libertine Fouquet's house, all the same she felt in her bones that Mlle de la Vallière *was* a decent girl.

"Do tell me what you really think, Jean Baptiste. You can't be asleep already."

He was not. Without turning, the unmannerly husband muttered that he didn't think anything. It wasn't his business. He had his orders. They were enough for him.

But not for his wife. Like the man she thought so badly of, she couldn't put the girl's face out of her mind.

She began again.

"When I wished her good night, sitting up in bed in her little lace night-cap, with her curls twisted up just like Marie Cristine does hers when she's going to a party, I couldn't help kissing her, and it made me feel most uncomfortable. I felt," said poor Madame Colbert, "I felt like Judas."

Her husband protested against such impious exaggeration.

"You'll be giving yourself the vapours, that's what you'll do next. Don't be so quick, giving yourself ideas. That young woman knows what she's up to."

"You were mighty quick to get her away from that house!"

"When I heard that our carriage had been seen standing outside that man's place I tumbled to what she was up to. I'm glad I did. I wasn't told to let her gad about visiting people."

The warm-hearted woman could have shaken him. Instead she gave the thick shoulder an imperious pat.

"You listen to me. It's not the sort of thing I like my old Jean to mix himself up in. Now that we've seen her, a convent girl, no father, almost an orphan one might say. Supposing it was one of our own girls, what would you say then?"

M. Colbert rolled heavily on to his back and sighed. Staring at a pale chintz ceiling half invisible in the dimness of a single night-light placed beside the bed, he spoke gloomily.

"It's no use you worrying your head about it. I don't like it myself, but I have to do many things I don't like."

"All the same, I wish you wouldn't do it. Can't you refuse? I'd stand by you. Tell him it's no part of your duty, a thing like that. I'd stand by you," she repeated.

"See here, Geneviève," the husband spoke with authority as a husband should. "My first duty is to look after you and the children. I've to keep my eyes open if I'm to get on in this world. Sometimes I have to keep them shut," he added with unconscious humour. "I don't ask questions about things I don't want to know anything about. I've

got to obey orders—that's my plain duty. Do you suppose I enjoy running about after a light woman—at my age."

"I won't say another word." Madame Colbert was angry now. "You don't know a light woman when you see one."

"I'm happy to think I don't," muttered her husband sulkily, and like the Priest and the Levite of an old tale, this respectable man turned his back on a deplorable affair which after all was no concern of his.

CHAPTER IX

"He who has the heart, has everything."

Carnets de Mazarin.

A good night did not relieve M. Colbert's gloom, which happily did not affect his appetite. After a substantial breakfast he set out on the execution of his duty in a hired coach and the lowest spirits. The young lady at his side must have thought him poor company. Her cheerful inquiries as to the identity of various buildings passed on the way to the City Gates elicited meagre responses. After some ten minutes of one-sided conversation she gave a sudden exclamation :

"We've passed that shop, and I quite forgot about my lace !"

M. Colbert gave her a look of patient reproach. There was no time for shopping ; they were late starting as it was.

Mademoiselle observed with penitence that she was always so absent-minded. She had seen a beautiful handkerchief in a shop near the Palais Royal, but it was shockingly expensive : or perhaps five pistoles wasn't really a high price for Point-de-France ? What did M. Colbert think ?

M. Colbert's phlegm was endangered by this revelation of sheer robbery. Three was plenty to give for Point-de-France, if it *were* genuine Point. He counselled an offer of three rising to four if need be.

"Oh dear ! I'm no good at bargaining : I've only to enter the shop for the merchants to know it immediately. To tell you the truth," she admitted sadly, "I don't know French Point from Venetian."

This touched M. Colbert's vanity. He prided himself

upon infallibility where fabrics were in question—lace in particular. Point-de-France, Point-de-Venice, Mechlin, Brussels, English and drawn-thread, he could tell you which was which in the dark ! He was completely unable to resist presenting this ignorant young woman with an expert's advice on the fascinating subject. He brightened up in warning her against fashionable milliners. Parisian shop-keepers were the worst swindlers in the Kingdom. If he had his way he'd hang a few of them as an encouragement to the rest.

"There's no call to be dishonest ; it never pays in the long run—in business or anywhere else."

The young lady agreed. "How interesting it is," she said admiringly. "I'd no notion there was so much to know about lace. You've taught me a lot."

The educationalist settled himself in his corner with something of an air : a modest, respectable air.

"There's not much I don't know about the Fabric trade," he admitted. "I'd like to see the man who'd get the better of me over lace—or silk—or velvets either," he added as one reluctantly parting with favour after favour.

Mlle de la Vallière could see that. She wondered if M. Colbert could tell her the rights and wrongs of that terrible strike of the Lyons silk weavers two years ago—or was it more ?

She had come to the right quarter. He gave her a full and detailed history of the vigorous and far-sighted measures he had employed in dealing with a pack of lazy workers and a set of avaricious masters.

M. Colbert had rarely had a more appreciative listener ; he was surprised at such discernment in a young person of lax morals.

"Of course, I acted for the Cardinal, but he gave me a free hand. Ah, that was a Master to work for," he added with feeling. Mlle de la Vallière sympathized. She had heard, however, that admirable as was Monseigneur's foreign policy, he was not perhaps at his best in home affairs.

M. Colbert considered. "I don't say but what you may be right," he conceded weightily. "Monseigneur was a man in a million—ten million—but he was a foreigner after all."

On the subject of foreigners in general he waxed eloquent. Flooding the markets with their cheap rubbish, underselling

good French merchandise. Those Hollanders were the worst offenders with the English a good second. English shoes, scoffed M. Colbert, with a vindictive glance down at the hem of his companion's smart blue travelling-dress. Nothing to them! There were no shoes a Frenchman couldn't make better than an Englishman, given the chance.

"I know what I'd do if I had my way."

"What would you do, M. Colbert?"

"Tax all foreign goods! Everything! Tax till you couldn't afford to waste good French money on 'em, if you wanted to!"

In this interesting fashion he entertained his travelling companion. His humour improved, he became almost amiable. He was surprised to find himself offering to make a bid for her Point lace, and when she revealed that it was a little gift for kind Madame Colbert she had in mind, he said graciously, refusing her proffered purse:

"I'll let you know what's the least they'll take."

At this juncture their improved relations were cut short. A bend in the winding country lane brought their rendezvous in sight. Head out of the window, M. Colbert saw that the party he expected to find was there already; he consulted his good Dutch watch (lest anyone should show surprise at this example of foreign merchandise, he was always careful to explain: "A present from an old friend").

"Six minutes before time," he said to no one in particular.

The keen little eyes appraised the distant group. The officer would be M. d'Artagnan; two of his musketeers, he recognized both, middle-aged men with excellent records and long service behind them; Laporte, too. Colbert felt relieved. He almost overlooked the King, sitting his bay horse apart, in his satisfaction at finding four solid, reputable men besides himself in the affair. If it was good enough for M. d'Artagnan it was good enough for anybody.

The King was hurrying up to meet them now, waving and calling a greeting. As cool as you please, objected M. Colbert to himself, genuinely embarrassed by the sight of such unabashed depravity. What a to-do about a petticoat! Tearing about, hat off, kissing her hand, assisting her to alight, telling her he had begun to fear she was never coming.

Colbert removed his own hat for his Sovereign; two fingers to the brim had been enough for a Mlle de la Vallière.

He fell behind while the couple exchanged a few words. It was some moments before he received the belated commendation, resented as less than his due.

"Not so bad, Colbert, only ten minutes late. Quite a good pace!"

"I ask your Majesty's pardon," protested the indignant traveller. "I make it on the stroke of eleven now." He glanced at the watch from Amsterdam.

"Your watch is slow," said his unfeeling employer. Even the young woman had more sense. She was sure such a beautiful timepiece was accurate. "It's a French make, isn't it, M. Colbert?"

The veracious owner resisted temptation. He was heard to murmur that French watch-makers hadn't much chance against the Hollanders.

"Frenchmen never get a chance for anything," said Louis, gaily. "Has he inflicted his grievances upon you all the way down, Mademoiselle? Take your grumbles back to Paris, my good Colbert. Good-day to you, convey my compliments to Madame your wife, not forgetting Mlle Marie-Christine."

Colbert remounted stiffly and rode off. At the bend of the road he ventured to look back. The green length of the lane was as bare as the palm of his hand. They were out of sight. He felt tired, disgruntled, obscurely jealous.

Tired, disgruntled and jealous, he drove a hard bargain for a dainty lace handkerchief, and for a pair of English pistols at the shop next door. The giving of presents did not habitually commend itself to M. Colbert, nevertheless he despatched the expensive fire-arms with his usual care to a young officer of whom he knew little except that he was in debt and had a loving sister. François de la Vallière told himself he was in luck. He had exaggerated his debts to his little Louise. M. Fouquet's draft covered them and left him forty pistoles to go on gambling with, and now came this welcome addition to his outfit. Thus, great minds think alike and cast their nets afar: a sprat may catch a mackerel!

It was only the third time they had been alone together. She knew nothing of him, he knew no more of her. He appeared completely at his ease, but the first gay greeting over, she felt in something of a dream. Everything seemed

fantastic. Staggering the adventure ! Incredible the attachment ! The countryside flooded with sunshine, the leafy road, the golden green trees, had an unreal air. The young man inquiring eagerly after her journey, telling her how divine she looked in that beautiful blue, might have been a coinage of her brain. Hardly would she have been surprised if the feast laid out on the grass, to which he led her, had suddenly taken wings and disappeared.

She was in a trance, but she felt no fear of him or of the enterprise. Her sole misgiving during the few days since she had consented to his unexpected, astounding proposal, had been for the wrong-doing. One couldn't help one's heart ; one couldn't prevent another's love ; but it was not possible to pretend that it was right to take a lover.

Yet never for one moment had she considered refusal. As soon as she had read his letter she knew she would go, in joy and in delight. It was a mortal sin—it was the most wonderful thing that had ever happened !

She had no real friends. If she had vanished that day from the world of men there would have been few to concern themselves. The careless mother ignored her ; to her step-father she had always been an encumbrance ; the devil-may-care brother loved her after his selfish fashion, but could he have seen his unimportant sister now—a kind little thing, but the last to make her way in the world—he would have given thanks for such unbelievable good fortune. As a fact except the Colberts, no one knew of her whereabouts. In accordance with the careful instructions Louis had enclosed with his brief, ardent letter, she had requested leave of absence in order to bid farewell to a brother—an officer unexpectedly ordered to join his company at Amiens. Louis had arranged that this fiction should become fact. François de la Vallière was rejoicing over his Ensign's commission in the Gendarmes Dauphin when his sister in M. Colbert's coach visited his lodging before proceeding to her escort's home. He was too full of his good luck, of the necessity of raising a sum to settle his debts of honour and buy some smart clothes before leaving Paris, to have much curiosity about Louise's movements. She was a dear girl to offer to sell her bracelet—he'd give her a finer, one day.

But François and his affairs were worlds away now. Here at her side was Louis, asking if this were not a perfect place for a picnic. It was real, it was to-day !

"One of my oldest friends," remarked Louis genially, indicating a correct, elderly little figure, apparently in charge of the lunch. "Laporte used to put me to bed and tell me fairy tales to get me off to sleep when I was no higher than his knee." Louise smiled at the old friend, bowing his "Madame!" Cross Mme de Navaille's lessons on etiquette prevented her just in time from curtsying to His Majesty's valet.

Two cushions were placed before the feast, one each side of the embroidered cloth. The embarrassing appearance of these deferential figures raised another problem. Ought one to sit down before the young man smiling happily at her, the King whom she had watched from her humble distance at banquets, served by nobles from their knees, vying to hand his cup, his finger-napkin.

"Which side do you prefer, my love?" inquired Louis, quite oblivious of M. Laporte. "This is best, don't you think? You won't have the sun in your eyes."

That wouldn't be comfortable for him, she objected. Nonsense, who wouldn't be comfortable sitting opposite her?

Laporte, advancing with a dish of cold pheasant, checked the compliments; anticipating the guest's inexperience he placed a choice portion on her plate. Louise watched him offer the dish to his Master. To her astonishment the King used his fingers in place of knife and fork. Surely this was not the aristocratic way to partake of game. The Duchess of Orléans had not eaten thus. She waited.

"Don't you care for pheasant, my treasure?" Louis inquired anxiously. Louise looked round the cloth. The valet with discreet understanding placed knife and fork before her.

"I expect you'll hold me old-fashioned," observed Louis cheerfully, concerned to gloss over this breach of table etiquette, "but in my opinion fowl loses flavour if cut with a knife. Just a matter of taste. You, I see, prefer the English fashion."

Like Laporte he knew, of course, that no one except wealthy bourgeois and eccentric foreigners ever took knife and fork to game, but everything this adorable creature did became her. She was free to break all the rules, even as the rules must be broken for her.

"Wine? Put it down, Laporte, and get your own dinner. We'll wait on ourselves."

He poured out two glasses.

"Our first toast together. What shall it be?" He chanted triumphantly:

*"Louis, Louise, one and the same,
Isn't it perfect we share the same name!
And—no one shall drink from this cup again!"*

The glass flew over his shoulder and crashed into the bushes amidst happy young laughter.

What a pretty compliment, how exciting it all was. He served her with salad, with thin sliced ham; he was concerned for her poor appetite. Didn't she fancy fruit? A peach perhaps, or this fine pear? He apologized for his own hunger. A politeness. She recalled how the Maids of Honour made fun of the Royal appetite. He quenched his thirst with orange water: a couple of glasses of wine sufficed him. He was enthusiastic on finding that she agreed as to the absurdity of coffee except as an early morning beverage. As for tea—Louis flicked away the name of that objectionable infusion with the drops of scented water from his finger-bowl. Drying his hands, he rose and came over to sit by her side and put his arms round her.

"I'm furiously happy you're here. Tell me you're happy we're alone together at last."

She hesitated. "When *are* we going to be alone?"

He looked his surprise.

"But, my love, I can't dismiss my guard. Surely d'Artagnan doesn't annoy you? As for poor old Laporte, he'd break his heart if I sent him off. I mightily doubt if he'd go! Don't vex your sweet head about them, Louise; they're absolutely trustworthy. Either of them would be chopped in pieces before he would betray my confidence." He dropped the light tone. "Of course it must seem strange to you. I'm grieved, my darling, but it's my duty to take precautions. We don't want another Ravaiillac and my father's life was twice attempted. It's part of the price one pays for being King." He concluded with a sort of conscious modesty.

With compunction she admitted she had not thought of this. All the same, she must know if there were anything worse to come.

"Where we are going—will there be more people there?"

"My darling, don't look so wistful ! You make me feel a brute."

They were bound for the finest hiding-place, he told her ; nobody but an old housekeeper lived in the tiny hunting-lodge off the beaten track and buried deep in woods. M. de St. Aignan had leased it to his brother. It was about two miles from Versailles, and he had given out that he was going to the latter place for a couple of days' shooting. The housekeeper had been told to expect a gentleman and his wife—friends of St. Aignan. His darling must be provided with a wedding ring. He set it on her hand, admiring the long, slender fingers and kissing them one by one.

The housekeeper taken over by the Duke of Orléans together with a couple of chambermaids, a gardener and a gamekeeper or two, had used particular trouble over her arrangements for the reception of the new employer's guests. An elderly, sociable soul, she was pleased by the prospect of a little excitement to break the monotony of her life in the unoccupied hunting-lodge.

The curtsying figure in best black gown and spotless lawn cap with old-fashioned lappets, offered the travellers a respectful and cordial welcome. The woman who had spent her life in the service of gentlefolk approved of the young couple at first sight. Monsieur's riding suit of plain brown did not deceive her for a moment. He looked every inch the gentleman. As for his lady, the housekeeper did not know when she had seen a prettier creature. She, too, was plainly dressed. Nothing fine or showy, but one could always tell the Quality.

She took pride in showing them over her well-kept domain. The dainty, white-walled *salon* was full of freshly-cut flowers. In the quaint little dining-room with red tiled floor and windows of little coloured panes, the table was hospitably set out with her best napery and silver. Stags' heads adorned the walls, their gentle mournful faces and magnificent branching antlers presiding over the room.

Would Madame wish to go to her bed-chamber above stairs ? Madame's maid, perhaps ?

The gentleman interposed. Madame had not brought her maid : his man would see to the baggage and wait on them both.

Upstairs the conductress threw open the door of the

daintiest bedroom imaginable. The lady was prayed to remark the new hangings, the admirable bed, its white lace curtains at the head-board only, in the new English mode. So much airier in summer-time, did not Madame think? And the new carpet. Her employer, M. de St. Aignan, had despatched these various articles from Paris. What a blessing they had arrived in time for Madame's use during her stay.

Opposite was the second best bedroom. Not quite so spacious perhaps and certainly not so light—the trees had been lopped to admit more light into the best chamber—but a comfortable room also, was it not? Which would Madame prefer?

The appearance of Monsieur's valet superintending the conveyance of baggage distracted the housekeeper's attention from the visitor, standing in the middle of the best bedroom, dangling her big felt hat by the ribbons and looking a little uncertain. The good woman liked the look of the elderly valet. Evidently an old family retainer. She remarked that he deposited some of the luggage together with his Master's hat in the second-best chamber. She had heard that the Quality, especially young married folk, affected separate rooms nowadays—a new-fangled idea!

Madame might be under the necessity of making her toilette unaided, but she descended to the supper-room as elegant as a Princess. A rose satin gown, confided the housekeeper afterwards to her cronies, cut low, but modestly you understand, and looking like a rose herself with her pretty pink cheeks and her pale golden curls on soft white shoulders. "Not a jewel, only two of our roses, one pink and one cream, in her hair—pinned just above the ear." Monsieur had picked them for her. He was fine also in his wine-coloured silk, deep yellow lace at neck and wrists, and his chestnut hair combed in thick curls over his collar. And the most beautiful rings, though his lady wore nothing but her wedding-ring: one a great diamond flashing like a star. She thought him a gay, pleasant gentleman, trolling a snatch of song as he crossed the hall to the supper room behind the full rosy skirts his companion held up in her hand. "Anyone could tell it was a love match, he couldn't keep his eyes off her. It was 'my love' and 'my treasure' all the time!"

The good soul, who dearly loved a romance, decided the young couple must be on their honeymoon; she regretted

that the kindly old manservant had deprived her of the pleasure of waiting on them at table. She lingered to catch a glimpse of them setting off, after supper, arm-in-arm, for a stroll. Just the night for lovers ; a big, yellow moon, the garden sweet with flowers, shining in its light like fairyland.

She was called back to a little walled seaside garden in Brittany, its paths edged with sea-shells and full of the sound of the waves. Again she was walking with the young black-haired sailor ; the sunburned face, with gold rings in the ears, bent lovingly. . . . That face had gone down under the cruel waves thirty years ago. Ah ! those days !

" I hope your young Mistress won't get damp feet in those thin shoes," she told the considerate valet in wishing him a good night.

At the end of the garden they paused and standing against the boundary hedge, turned towards the house. The full moon was only half-way up the clear night sky. At hand the trees stood sharp and black, but their shadows lay long and soft on the silver grass which traced a shining pathway to the little house. In the moonlight the windows glittered as if lit from within, the pointed gables shone ; from the open door the invitation of candlelight issued in gentle, friendly fashion.

For some moments they stood without speaking, she encircled by his arm, her head resting against his shoulder. Presently he began to quote from the ballet in which, at Fontainebleau, both had taken part :

*" Ne sommes nous pas trop heureux,
Belle Iris, que tu en semble ? "*

She remained silent, leaning against him and looking up at the bright remote sky with its sprinkled stars and great steady moon. Her thoughts were too full for the escape of words. All my life this has been waiting for me. The moon looking down on this little secret garden, the black trees, the white flowers, the little house ! And I am Louise de la Vallière and my lover is by me, holding me in his arms. I shall wake up and find it a dream—and weep to find it a dream !

The only sound in all the still, enchanted world was the low, serious voice :

*" Nous voici, tous deux ensemble,
Et nous nous parlons tous deux,
Et l'amour et les étoiles
Sont nos seuls confidants."*

" Benserade might have written that for us," he said,

*" Mon cœur est sous votre loy
Et n'en peut aimer un autre.
Laissez-moi voir dans le vôtre
Ce qui s'y passe pour moy ! "*

He stopped.

" Never mind the moon, Louise, abase your eyes on me. I see your face; beautiful, kind. I feel your heart beating beneath my hand, but it keeps your secret. Tell me what I want to know. What is in your heart for me ? "

She moved her head and looked at him thoughtfully. Then she laid her face against his shoulder again, her free arm fell lightly across his breast. They stayed thus embraced in the still, summer evening, in the garden full of flowers.

CHAPTER X

M. FOUQUET, at his desk in that elegant room where he had received a young friend newly arrived in Paris, was at some pains over the composition of a letter. Although only a few lines, he wrote them more than once before they were to his satisfaction :

I am enchanted to learn that you are my near neighbour and to hear on all sides that Mlle de la Vallière is in radiant health and looking, if that be possible, more charming than ever.

He tore it up ; that sort of affected flattery would not be acceptable to this girl.

MADemoiselle,

A devoted friend begs to recall himself to your kind memory. May he flatter himself that amidst the pleasures of the Court he is not entirely forgotten ?

Finally he wrote :

I am anxious to know whether you have been able to assist me in the matter we spoke of at your kind visit. If you should have news for me, you may confide it to the entirely trustworthy and discreet messenger who brings this to you. I shall not ask your forgiveness for my importunity since I believe your friendship for me is such that you will desire to put my mind at ease. I beg you, dear Mademoiselle, to accept the assurance of my affectionate and devoted sentiments.

He re-read it, signed and sanded it, and after sealing despatched it to the Palais Royal by his confidential valet. Péquée had carried his Master's billets to many a pretty lady and to some unlikely destinations. The injunction to place the letter in the hands of Mlle de la Vallière—no other—presented no difficulty to him. The genial M. Péquée, dispenser of the Surintendant's lavish bounty was a universal favourite. He had connections and cronies in every notable house in Paris, and was particularly welcome at the Palais Royal where, though the best wine flowed freely in the Steward's Hall, the unpaid bills were enormous and the wages habitually in arrears.

M. Fouquet told no less than the truth in stating that he was anxious to hear from his protégée. It was a fortnight since he had parted from her, and the Orléans household had been installed in the Palais Royal nearly a week ago. From the one or two ladies who made it their business to keep him informed on Court affairs he knew that the young Maid of Honour had returned from her holiday in radiant spirits. It seemed she had overcome her early gaucherie and was finding her feet. His Majesty and Monsieur appeared to have composed their differences, and this although the former remained assiduous in his visits to Madame. He was to be found at the Palais Royal most evenings, Monsieur seeming quite unconcerned although he and his wife were still at loggerheads. Pressed about Mlle de la Vallière, M. Fouquet's informants could ascertain nothing definite. A few said His Majesty was interested in the girl, others that it was Mlle de Pons he was running after. Mlle Tonnay-Charente's name had been mentioned, but those likely to

be in the know considered all such flirtations merely a blind to keep Monsieur peaceable.

M. Fouquet, listening gravely to such speculations, permitted himself an inward smile at the thought that he knew better where the truth lay. The increased consideration which the King displayed towards his Minister of Finance was satisfactory evidence. This last couple of weeks it had been marked. Sanguine by temperament, with a happy faculty for believing what he chose to believe, the Surintendant's misgivings vanished. Obviously the King was learning to value his abilities. Although outside his province, he had recently been entrusted with important negotiations—the Treaty with Portugal. His Majesty had said in his unsmiling way that he relied on M. Fouquet's experience in intricate affairs to bring the confidential preliminaries to a successful issue. He had expressed satisfaction at the result. As well he might, thought the unofficial diplomat. It had cost him a little fortune in bribes, plenty of flattery, promises galore and the goodwill of an old friend.

Lionne, easy-going as he was, could not but be piqued at finding himself superseded for the occasion by this brilliant amateur. Fouquet regretted the estrangement, but he would have sacrificed a dozen Lionnes for the grave smile and the few words with which Louis had commended his exertions.

"You have convinced me that you are a very able man, M. le Surintendant."

Fouquet had left the Council Chamber treading on air. Ambition sang sweetly in his ears. Mazarin's vacant place was still unfilled and had not the King recently inferred that the old Chancellor, Séguier, was past his job? Louis had spoken openly of other changes. It was plain that his known distrust of the Paris Parlement would not remain passive. Fouquet thought this inevitable: Mazarin's pupil, Anne of Austria's son, was not likely to forget the rôle Parlement had played in the Fronde, nor that which an Assembly with wider powers had assumed in England.

The King was obviously bent on curbing the authority of Parlement, on reducing its rights and privileges. He had intimated that he counted on the co-operation of his Ministers to this end. This would place M. Nicolas Fouquet, Procureur-Général, in an invidious position. Parlement would not submit tamely to the Royal policy; one of its chief Officers could not openly assist in its humiliation. Yet the

King, who was known to disapprove of plurality of Offices, appeared oblivious of the Surintendant's dilemma, and Fouquet's instinct forbade him to put the question direct.

The King could be touchy when he liked, thought Fouquet, and probably young dignity shrank from making a personal favour of the matter.

The actor of fine, lavish rôles, pictured a magnificent gesture : " If I sell my office I propose, with your Majesty's approval, to invest the greater part of the purchase money in the Public Funds." When he rehearsed this patriotic intention his heart warmed to the man he desired to impress.

For other considerations, also, Fouquet was revising his opinion of his Prince. After all, one should be able to make allowances if sudden freedom and accession to power had turned a young man's head. That first exhilaration over, the King was settling down nicely. This love affair with a simple girl was a good sign that the attractions of government were beginning to wane.

The Minister assured himself that before long he would have King Louis where he wanted him and himself where he wanted to be.

Now about this business of the Procureur-Général : should he sell the office or should he not ? There were several good reasons in favour, only one against. To begin with he could do with some money just now. His principal securities were tied up as guarantee to the foreign money-lenders to the Crown. In fact it was the knowledge that M. Fouquet stood behind the Treasury that induced Amsterdam and Genoa to lend to impoverished France. The Exchequer owed him a pretty penny, mused the Minister for Finance somewhat ruefully. He had long since ceased to remember how his fortune had been made.

Then, too, he had overspent of late—the building and embellishing of Vaux, the princely fête given to entertain the King. Certain creditors were presenting their accounts ; deferentially, but Fouquet recognized the signs.

Moreover Le Tellier, the prospective purchaser, was always bothering him to say Yes or No. Le Tellier appeared sure of the King's approval ; he had even called on a subordinate—Colbert—to confirm him on the point. Yet Le Tellier, pressed, proved to have no first-hand evidence of the royal wishes, and Fouquet, careless as he was of the jealousy of colleagues he deemed insignificant, did not go so far as to trust them ; he

knew that neither Le Tellier nor any of them, except perhaps the offended Lionne, would weep to see him make a blunder.

If only that little la Vallière would let me know how the land lies, he mused.

As for the one objection to the sale. The office of Procureur-Général carried certain privileges: immunity from arbitrary arrest, the right to be tried by Parlement only, and other lesser safeguards. Fouquet was popular with the Parlement; most of the members were in his pocket, his pensioners, or beholden to him for various favours. Himself he scoffed at the idea that he might ever need such protections. His wife did not scoff, however, and neither did Mme du Plessis. The two women, rivals for the man's heart, were allies where his safety was concerned.

Mme Fouquet, gentle creature, a second wife much younger than her husband, adored her errant spouse. She begged him for her sake not to run the least risk. As for du Plessis who, no longer Fouquet's latest flame, was his very attached friend—that handsome woman, practical in all she undertook, wasted no time on entreaties but brought her firm ringed hand down on M. Fouquet's desk with a thump.

"I'd leifer sell my pearls than see you walk out of Parlement," she declared. "You tell that scurvy Le Tellier to go to the Devil! What does he mean bringing a little rat like Papa Colbert to poke his nose into his betters' business? What next? Don't you trust them Nicolas; they'd sell their souls to step into your shoes!"

Nicolas smiled his indulgent superiority. "La, my dear, not one of them *could* take my place—and the King knows it!"

Mme du Plessis waxed more emphatic than before. She wouldn't trust *that* young man an inch further than she could see him. Requested to be more explicit, she added: "I shouldn't wonder if he had something up his sleeve!"

M. Fouquet, appreciating the kindly concern inspiring such sentiments, treated them with affectionate derision. To hear her talk anyone would think there was a *lettre de cachet* waiting for him in His Majesty's desk!

"That's just what I *don't* think," she countered triumphantly. "But I wouldn't like to say there mightn't be one once you've sold your Office. Don't put yourself in anyone's power! And don't forget who trained King Louis! Like master, like scholar, they say, and the old Cardinal was a double-faced rascal if ever there was one!"

M. Fouquet, smiling and pouring his excellent champagne for his friend and himself, divulged to the lady that he had discovered how to handle the King of France.

"Flatter him, agree with him, let him take all the credit, let him think he's running the country and you can do pretty well what you like with him—King Louis XIV. He's really rather credulous, you know. Easily persuaded. Moreover," added the Surintendant slyly, "I've a good friend in that quarter."

But Mme du Plessis remained unconvinced. She had seen plenty of men in her time, and she recognized the breed: stiff-necked, selfish, thinking himself God Almighty beneath that quiet, touch-me-not air. It would take more than a little girl fresh from her convent to get round that sort of man. "Why, I'd be put to it to do it myself," she admitted, "or Ninon de l'Enclos either!"

Draining her third glass she dilated on the subject. She would not have the King for a lover if there weren't another man in France! She felt quite sorry for that nice little *la Vallière*.

Mlle de la Vallière was enjoying herself. She experienced the exciting sensation of being a success. In her rose-coloured silk, M. Fouquet's ear-rings swinging and shining from under her blonde curls, every mirror told her that she was looking her best, and more than one gallant courtier agreed with the mirrors. She could have danced every dance twice over; partners besieged her, hovered round her between the sets. M. de Bienne had scarcely left her side all evening, and Mr. Horace Smith had whispered in his atrocious accent, under cover of violins, "*Ma très belle Sylvie!*"

Meanwhile one young man present, who had not asked her to dance, who had not spoken to her, but whom she knew to be watching her covertly all the time, had contrived to let her know that he would be in Monsieur's private waiting-room at ten o'clock and they could count on a few minutes alone there.

Waiting for that happy hour, she sat on the floor of Madame's drawing-room, one of a circle of young people enjoying the English game, "I love my love with an A." Mr. Smith had introduced this frolic to the Palais Royal: the sedate Scotsman was acquiring popularity as a resourceful entertainer.

Louise had her triumphs here also. Léoménie de Brienne, a little cock-sparrow of a man, dashing in sky-blue velvet and silver trimmings, broke all the rules of the game in loving her with a V because she was Venus, hating her for her Virtue, taking her to Versailles, that little hunting-box in the woods, and feeding her on Crème Vanille, the Lovely Vallière ! On Mr. Smith protesting doggedly against this irregular introduction of surnames the resourceful Brienne harked back to L.

"Luisante ! Languisante !" He took her to the Louvre this time, the gardens be it understood, not the stuffy old Palace, fed her on Langoustes and her name was Louise !

This double compliment evoked much applause ; emboldened, Brienne thought fit to make a dash for his charmer's fan. The clumsy fellow, stretching right across Mlle Tonnay-Charente, overbalanced and sprawled into her primrose silk lap. The beauty, already put out by such ridiculous attentions to a provincial chit, scolded him sharply. He was making too much noise, Mme de Navailles would be down on them in a moment. Indignantly she removed her crushed skirts to the other side of the ring and sympathized with Mr. Smith in his complaints.

Léoménie, now installed in the vacant place next Louise, began to fan her so vigorously that her sleek-set hair was roughened. Protesting his desolation, the saucy fellow offered to play the coiffeur and repair the damage. Mlle de la Vallière did not appear to resent this familiarity. Maybe she desired to vex Tonnay-Charente smiling sourly ; maybe she caught a glance from the other end of the drawing-room where, seated at the card tables, the great folk were finishing their party of l'Ombre, and was not averse to letting someone see that more than one admired her. Certainly she ordered Brienne to keep his hands to himself, but the young man did not take the prohibition seriously. Between the two of them, laughing, protesting, some pale curls escaped from a band of silver ribbons and, untwisted, hung loose on white shoulders.

Brienne stayed her hand. She was perfect thus, he avowed. He entreated her to let her hair be. She ought to have her picture painted just as she was : sitting there on the floor with unbound hair, she reminded him of that marvellous picture in the Royal Galleries—Magdalene wiping the feet

of the Saviour with her golden tresses. He called upon his audience to agree with him.

The reckless youth had not troubled to lower his voice. Someone whispered "Hush!" Tonnay-Charente remarked acidly that Madame was looking their way, looking annoyed too, and no wonder with such a racket.

The Royal party had risen and were coming down the room. Mr. Smith who, despite his puritanical appearance, had served his social apprenticeship at Whitehall, could not imagine that a sister of Charles Stuart would be displeased by such harmless romping. It did occur to him, as he stood up for Royalty, that the surly-faced young French King couldn't hold a candle to his own jovial Sovereign.

Madame, very self-possessed, very elegant in carnation-red velvet, with those two grand gentlemen in attendance—husband on one side, brother-in-law on the other, evinced a gracious interest in Mr. Smith's innovation.

"I thought from the uproar you must be crying forfeits. Surely that is a forfeit M. le Comte de Brienne has there!"

Brienne shut up the fan smartly, but he was not abashed. The King and Monsieur were playmates of his boyhood, and his very good friends. He stood in no awe of either, let alone the Englishwoman. Gaily he explained to the Royal trio that they had been discussing Mlle de la Vallière's portrait. Ought she not to sit just as she was, in her hair? He indicated Louise with a flourish, and she, blushing furiously, pushing her curls up anyhow, could have sunk through the ground.

"As a matter of fact," quoth airy Brienne, "I've begged her to allow me to commission Lefèvre to paint her as Magdalen. She's the image of that Saint in His Majesty's collection."

Any pleasantry which could be construed as an innuendo on that intriguing subject, the virginity of a maid, would have been applauded in King Charles's drawing-room. Mr. Smith was rather surprised to observe displeasure on the French King's face. He had always understood the French were a lewd people. The Princess Henriette, of course, took such rubbish lightly.

"Why I vow you've quite the artist's eye, M. le Comte!" Madame scrutinized the flushed, embarrassed face with a little smile. "Magdalen at seventeen! Charming! Very like the Louvre painting, don't you agree, Monsieur?"

Her husband remarked that he saw no resemblance. He added, genially, that Brienne was an idiot. His brother gave the friend of his boyhood a look which even that fatuous young man could not interpret as friendly, but merely observed in an expressionless voice that the picture in question was of a much older woman, and that if Mademoiselle were to permit her portrait to be limned, it should rather be as Diana. He bowed formally to her and the Royal party moved on.

As soon as they were out of earshot, Louise turned on Brienne.

"My fan!" Snatching it from him she swept from the room.

Mr. Smith approached the Courtier. "If duelling were not against the law in your miserable country, I'd call you out for annoying a lady!"

"Don't let that hinder you, Milor Englishman," snarled the other. "Whenever you please: it can't be too soon for me."

A voice not to be disregarded cut short the furious young man.

"Brienne, a word with you!"

Brienne flung an imploring look at his Sovereign. Too bad to have to abandon this promising quarrel! He made the tall foreigner his haughtiest bow. "The King requires me—I'll be at your service later, Milor."

It was scarcely the King who required him. It was the playmate of his boyhood in one of his rare rages, always so much more difficult to appease than Philip's frequent tantrums.

"What the devil do you mean by making her conspicuous?"

The other stared at the hot, angry face. "Sir? I don't understand."

"Don't shout! You know perfectly well who I mean. Do you imagine you're in love with her?"

"I apologize, Sir. I'd no idea you'd take exception to a jest. In love with Mlle de la Vallière? If I am, it's nothing serious."

"Don't lie!" Violence was suppressed in the low voice. "Anyone can see you're in love with her."

Such extraordinary vehemence dismayed Brienne. He began to stammer: "I'm not mighty hot on her, Sir—it

doesn't mean much to me—I'm married, you know. If she pleases you I'll stand aside."

"You'll please me by leaving her portrait alone!"

The stupefied young courtier was thankful to take the impatient gesture as dismissal. He stepped back, but Louis caught his wide sky-blue sleeve. He raised his voice, for the benefit of those around: "And have the goodness not to defy my prohibition of duelling in my very presence."

He flung the sleeve from him. Brienne, his mortification complete, watched him walk rapidly towards the door. The King was in a bad way; something out of the usual must have upset him. It couldn't be just because he'd been flirting with that girl. Barely ten o'clock and the evening spoilt.

Louis hastened after Louise. He cursed the notice his unceremonious withdrawal would be sure to arouse, cursed the obstacles which debarred him from approaching her openly, cursed Brienne, Henriette, even harmless Mr. Smith, above all the indignity of being compelled to use the backstairs in his brother's house.

As he pulled back the door curtain a man came out, and almost collided with him. Although he merely said "Pardon," did not show any recognition and proceeded downstairs immediately, Louis, whose memory for faces was excellent, recognized him as Fouquet's servant, and was furious at the would-be tactfulness.

Louise was standing before a table which held candles and flowers. She had an open letter in her hand. She looked up, and he saw that she was still upset. Involuntarily, without a word, without any special reason, he took the letter from her.

"What's all this?" His eyes ran down the lines. "What's that fellow Fouquet writing to you about now?"

"It's nothing." She held out her hand. He did not yield the letter. He was looking from it to her now.

"But what does he mean?"

"It's nothing—only something he asked me."

He continued to stare at her standing there with the candlelight full on her flushed face and disarranged hair.

"I'm asking you to tell me what this means, Louise."

Again she made to take the letter; again he held back his hand.

"Please give it me back: it's a private matter, and I promised not to talk about it."

If he still spoke patiently it was with effort. "Are you telling me that you promised that man to keep a secret from me? Do you wish me to believe that he knows how things are between us?"

Her hand dropped to her side. It seemed to him fantastic that his Louise, standing there in that same rose-coloured dress, should be refusing to answer him. Suddenly he went to the door and locked it. Turning he saw that her expression had changed. She looked frightened.

He came over to her and spoke gently. "Don't let's have misunderstanding, my dear," and after a moment he laid his hand on her arm. "Won't you tell me what it is, Louise?"

She made a movement as if for release. "I *have* told you. . . . It's nothing. Nothing to make all this fuss about."

His face hardened; he removed his hand. "I insist on knowing what this letter signifies."

"You can't insist on my breaking my promise . . . and I won't break it."

This was an echo of the voice in the summer-house, childish and angry. He remembered that he had misjudged her before.

"Louise," he said patiently again, "do think what you're saying. You've no right to receive a letter like this from that abominable man and refuse to tell me what it means."

She retorted with spirit, "He's not abominable!"

"Oh no," said Louis bitterly. "He's your kind friend, isn't he? I'd like to throw his damned ear-rings in the river," and, as she put up her hands as if to protect the emeralds, he exclaimed, "Leave your hair alone! It's untidy enough as it is. I suppose you enjoyed letting that fool play about with it in public!"

Her face lifted in disdain. "Don't touch my ear-rings," and again he heard the defiance of a child.

But the appeal was weakening. This incomprehensible obstinacy, wounding to his love, was humiliation to his pride. When she said as one yielding a concession, "If you wish I will ask M. Fouquet's permission to tell you," the last shred of his forbearance dissolved.

"You'll ask his permission to tell me! A thousand thanks! Keep your precious secret. I'll tell you another

of them. I happen to know you paid him a visit the very day before you came to me. You did not think it necessary to mention it : no doubt such a trifle slipped your memory."

He felt that he was hurling himself against a wall. The pretty face did not so much as look at him. A wave of bitterness rose up and overwhelmed him. He had given himself to this girl, he, who from childhood had shrunk from any strange touch, from any familiarity. He had violated his rule of life in this self-abandonment. To him his love was no imperfect gift, full of reservations and self-gratification, but an offering unique in value. He regarded her as his own, trusting as he had never trusted before. He would have staked his life on her sincerity. In his fury of disappointment he could have struck the graceful figure in the rosy gown which mocked him with memories too bitter to be endured. Wound her somehow he would.

"You're mighty clever for a girl of seventeen. I told you once before you wanted to have the laugh of the King. Laugh away, my dear, I hope you find it entertaining. I'll bid you good night."

She was crying now but her voice was resolute :

"You'll not keep my letter ! It's mine—give it back to me !"

Again that sense of it all having happened before. The desperate longing to find once more that he had misunderstood her, to be happy again, the reluctance to lose what had been his own, the dread of wretched sleepless hours ahead, kept him from leaving her. He lost his head beneath the whirl of emotions.

He came back to her, holding out the letter he had crushed to shapelessness ; he spoke incoherently, "I can't believe it. There must be something behind this. I can't bear to think you've cheated me. For pity's sake, speak. If I've wronged you I'll ask your pardon ; I'd go on my knees, I'd do anything ! Why can't you tell me ? You needn't be afraid to tell me anything you've done. I wouldn't harm you : I've been too fond of you for that."

The young man's voice broke ; he ended hoarsely, "As for that thief, only wait till I get hold of him. God's Death ! I'll teach him to keep his filthy hands from what's mine !"

He gripped the marble of a console standing near, the knuckles gleamed white in the clenched fingers.

"Are you accusing me again that I should be M. Fouquet's mistress when you know full well what a lie it is ?"

The icy voice restored his self-control. When he spoke it was quietly : " I'm not accusing you of anything except disloyalty to me. No, you haven't been his mistress, but he's got some hold over you. I demand as my right that you explain it. I'll take no less from you ; either you tell me everything from beginning to end—or we part ! "

She threw up her head. She gave him a look far prouder than his own. " As you please," and walking straight to the door unlocked it.

" How I wish I'd never gone away with you ! "

She flung it at him. The same lovely girl, the same lovely dress, all the enchantment which had been his in those few perfect days, not a week ago ; all changed, finished, with a heartless denial and a door most unceremoniously closed.

He had the impulse to rush after her, to drag her back, to force her to speak, but he stood rooted to the floor, staring at the room, hangings, furniture, all as unmoved as though no catastrophe had fallen within its walls. The echo of that imperious withdrawal prolonged itself through the indifferent air. Its persistence rewoke his anger. He drew a breath.

" To dare to slam the door on me ! "

CHAPTER XI

LEAVING the sad field in style, head up, colours flying, Louise ran full tilt into Mme de Navailles. The governess of the Maids of Honour, experienced in dealing with difficult young women, reduced this one in no time. Who had banged a door ? Why had she thus absented herself without permission from attendance upon Madame ? Her hair ? A suspicious glance at the unlucky coiffure convicted the culprit of a poor excuse. Really such an unkempt appearance, such a breach of good manners, was inexcusable. Maids of Honour were required to possess standards of decorum, of breeding. " You will need to correct your deportment, Mademoiselle, if you wish to retain your post. Her Royal Highness is displeased."

Louise fled. In the attic bedroom, which, small and barely furnished as it was, she shared with another girl, she

began to sob wildly. Mme de Navailles had been the first to rob her of the sustaining consolation of a proud withdrawal ; Mlle de Montalais, her room-mate, was second. The cheerful, talkative creature, everyone's friend because of a homely face and serviceable disposition, gave one look at her companion and set herself to pity her poor la Vallière. Surnames were the fashion amongst the Maids of Honour.

Poor la Vallière certainly, but why take it to heart ? True Mme de Navailles had seemed annoyed ; true Brienne, tiresome fellow, had done his best to make her a laughing stock. " A pity you didn't snub him, my dear," but he wasn't serious ; it was only his silly way. He had been far more forthcoming to Montalais herself a day or two ago, only she had put her foot down properly. " As for that cat, Athénais Tonnay-Charente," confided the Maid of Honour from her seat on Louise's bed, pulling down her long ringlets and introducing them one by one into her curl papers, " what do you think Tonnay-Charente had to say after the King left, in a hurry you know, just after you ? She piped up and said that maybe His Majesty had gone to take a peep at the Magdalen in his collection. Wasn't it spiteful of her, my dear, to say a thing like that ? Everyone said how spiteful it was, though they couldn't help laughing. It was so droll, the way she said it. Madame looked haughty, I can tell you, and that queer Scot made it worse. Do you know what he said ; he said——" Mlle de Montalais broke off at sight of a face smiling in at the door. " Well you shouldn't listen at doors, Tonnay-Charente, if you don't like to hear the truth, dear."

" No need to listen, my angel," the newcomer spoke cheerfully. " Your sweet little voice makes itself heard all over the Palace, Madame said as much yesterday ; in fact she said more, but *I* don't repeat things."

However, she had not come to listen to Montalais's melodious voice but to deliver a message. Madame desired the attendance of Mlle de la Vallière. " I recommend you to make haste, Louise ; I wouldn't keep her waiting if I were you. You are unlucky to-night, aren't you, poor one ? Didn't I warn you not to look at the new moon through glass ? Perhaps you'd better tidy your hair first." The smiling face vanished.

Louise started on her hair ; did it badly in her nervous

haste ; the mirror showed not only the ill-arranged curls, but the reddened eyes and swollen face. Montalais hovered round with comb and ribbons, sympathizing and reviling Athénais Tonnay-Charente. She was a conceited madam, and a superstitious fool. New moons, black cats and all that rubbish ; why Tonnay-Charente actually said the Lord's Prayer backwards three times over before sitting down to play cards—and she does often win, doesn't she ? She rambled on but Louise did not hear her ; she was busy with a small cedar box, the only receptacle she possessed with a good lock. She took out her precious love-letters and pushed them inside her bodice. There was nothing else to trouble about ; she had literally not a penny in the world to take with her in her flight.

This summons was the last straw. In imagination she saw herself, disarranged and tear-stained, an object for scorn and ridicule, condemned beforehand. Even that might possibly be endured but afterwards—to be set to read aloud with her head in a whirl and her throat aching with suppressed tears, the English tormentress lying at ease in the great bed, sneering, criticizing, "This is supposed to be a poem, Mademoiselle, not a sermon." She pictured her own ignominious breakdown. No matter what any of them said or did, she would escape from this hateful place.

She turned to the left of the corridor, ran down an uncarpeted service staircase, along the passage below, down another flight to the ground floor. This portion of the palace was unknown to her. From its bare appearance she judged it to be the servants' quarters. No one was about, though from behind a door she heard men's voices. She halted on the staircase and presently, peeping over the bannister, heard a door open and saw two men come out and walk slowly down the passage.

"Look us up again soon, Péquée. Always delighted to see you, old fellow."

The sound of the withdrawal of heavy bolts muffled the rejoinder.

"Fine night, but looks stormy, shouldn't wonder if it rained in the night. Au revoir, Péquée. Many thanks."

"But nothing at all. A pleasure. Au revoir, Pierre. Your turn to come round to our place next, remember. Au revoir."

She recognized name and voice. She darted downstairs

and reached the door as the porter was refastening it. She spoke in a rush.

"Was that M. Fouquet's messenger? I must speak with him; he brought me a letter this evening—Mlle de la Vallière. It's important. I'll go after him. No, don't trouble; I'll run quickly or he'll be gone."

The man stared but he opened the door again. In a flash she was past him, in the open air, running down a little passage as if for dear life. The passage curved and ended in an alleyway, dimly lit by an overhead swinging lantern. Before her hurried Péquée's retreating back. She stopped, breathless with fear that he might look round, but he went on, disappearing round a corner. Instantly she emerged into the alleyway and ran in the opposite direction on to an open space. It was lighter here, and one could see the moon overhead racing in and out of the light clouds. She spied an opening between two tall buildings and fled down a narrow, dark length of pavement, shut in by high, shuttered houses. It ended in a walled street with houses on one side only. She slackened speed now and listened. No sound of pursuit; not even a barking dog. Thank God! she found herself saying, and became aware that she had said it over and over again already.

Never in her life had she been out alone at night before. She had heard that Paris after dark was infested with thieves and cut-throats, but in her state of mind such perils were less to be dreaded than the situation behind. "I haven't a sou in my purse," she thought; "no one would want to rob me." But remembering her unlucky new emeralds she halted, removed them from her ears and, wrapping them in her handkerchief, put them in her bodice next to the letters. This little packet and her ring was all that remained to her of her wonderful love affair, she thought with sad incredulity. She would never have the heart to read the letters again, and yet their presence comforted. If only she had not gone away with him! It had been a terrible mistake. She had only cheapened herself to one who cared so little for her that he could throw her aside at the first difference.

A clock struck two, a leisurely, presiding sound; she wondered from what church it came. Then another, very loud and authoritative and another, distant as a whisper. The clocks frightened her. She pictured them aloft, presences

unseen but vigilant and implacable, watching her alone in all Paris.

The summer night ran its short course. From the west clouds might gather reluctantly, but the high moon slipping in and out each silvery curtain, threading a purposeful way across the dark blue seas and pale continents of the sky, glanced down at the world with the detached interest of an old traveller for territory often passed but never to be trodden.

Moonlight beautified the old walled city of innumerable spires, drew narrow strips of brightness down miserable streets where upper stories crazily overhanging the filthy kennels, protested sullenly against this exposure of hunger and despair. It painted a carpet of glittering snow on the summer lawns of rich squares guarded by stone mansions of austere beauty. Dark gardens filled with perfumed trees and faint with jasmine and honeysuckle, above whose iron gates heraldic eagles and rampant lions threatened, became fairy woods wrought thickly in pure silver. All down the Louvre quayside the enchantment waxed and waned. Under the row of lime trees lay a pattern of black and white gossamer, a border of fantasy to the broad fabric of the river which at slow, majestic pace convoyed a captive moon drowning in beauty amidst a halo of pale, gilded foam.

Few were abroad at that hour in the town which had no organized police. A vagrant, slumbering uneasily under a black archway, one ear open ; a trio of tipplers staggering homeward, arms linked, roaring a jolly chorus in defiance of the casual Watch ; a ragged creature, sack in hand, turning over the rubbish heaps. Opposite a lighted doorway a dark figure motionless as a statue started to life as a man emerged. A blade flashed, to be replaced with a curse as the watcher recognized the low broad hat—only the curé returning to his bed from an errand of mercy.

Past these and others like them flitted another wanderer of Paris night. A fugitive, light and insubstantial as a moth. Moth-like in the swift, uncertain movements, the fluttering dress. Darting blindly up one turning, down the next, in bewildered and panic-stricken flight, a creature out of its element, desperate to free itself of the encircling walls.

The Sister-Portress was surprised to hear the lodge bell

ring at five o'clock in the morning. Mass was at six, the early worshippers arrived a few minutes before the hour. She was surprised, but mildly so; forty years of convent life had robbed the lay-sister of capacity for astonishment. Things were so or they were not. The bell had rung, it must be answered.

A little thin scrap of a woman buried in her ample grey habit, the Portress opened the hall door to a drizzling misty morning. Tucking up her skirts she pattered down the wet flagstones to the outer door. Some poor soul for an alms, most like. She thought wistfully of the big basin of stale crusts on her kitchen table. Time was when she had considered herself free to give these to the beggars presenting themselves at her kitchen door. They had been so pleased, the poor souls; it had been delightful to see the white pinched faces light up, to watch the children gobble the bacon rinds and apple corings. But those days were past. The new Mother Assistant had forbidden such waste. The scraps were the pigs' portion, to be turned into good hams for winter. Mother Assistant had rebuked the lay-sister for improvidence. She had submitted humbly, but it had hurt her to turn her poor folk away. For some time afterwards she had shrunk from answering the bell.

Sister Portress drew back the wooden shutter. The grated opening framed a head wrapped in a light shawl. In the wan light, blurred with impending rain, the nun made out a pale young face.

"Praised be Jesus Christ! Who is it?"

The orthodox answer came back. "For ever and ever, Amen. Can I come in, Sister?"

"You're too early, my dear; Mass isn't till six."

"Perhaps I could rest in the Chapel. I'm so wet and tired."

The kindly nun thought she might risk it. It was too early, of course, but Mother Assistant had laid down no rule against the admittance of callers at five. She drew forth her bunch of huge, heavy keys and unlocked and unbarred the outer door. A trifle nervous, she opened it half-way only. A woman pushed through the narrow opening. The Sister-Portress' faded grey eyes saw a poor young thing in drenched garments—a candidate for compassion. She had little amazement for a draggled pink satin gown, for broken, muddy, satin shoes, one with a heel missing. She

saw the girl as she saw her applicants for crusts, the famished sparrows in winter, the duck whose broken leg she had bound to a splint. But she saw her as something more also.

In her far-away youth, at the end of those eighteen years in the sinful world outside, she had served as a kitchen maid in a noble family. The Countess had been a high, unapproachable presence, but there had been a young daughter, a gay, fairy vision admired from afar. One unforgettable day she had descended to the kitchen and warmed silk-clad feet at the great hearth. She had sat there with the firelight on shining pink skirts.

Time, which had flowed as monotonously, as endlessly, as waves whispering on a flat and sandy shore, had confused her memories.

"Excuse me for asking, you're not Mlle Justine, are you? It's a long time since I saw her. I can't remember."

Mother-Assistant preserved her patience during the rambling appeal. She listened to the end, hands folded beneath her scapular, looking down tolerantly on the foolish face and reminding herself that here was her sister in Christ, not a tiresome old creature with her veil pinned askew and an irritating, whispering voice.

"Oh no, Sister, that would never do; we can't possibly have strangers in the kitchen. They might take things, and it would be putting temptation in their way. Besides we can't feed everyone; we're poor ourselves, we must remember. Where did you leave her? Oh, you shouldn't have left her in the Parlour. You should have asked first. Do remember another time, Sister. Strangers must be left outside the door until you've asked what you shall do. Now try to remember for another time, won't you?"

The nun, recollecting that distinctions of class and natural gifts are forbidden to a good religious, manufactured an encouraging smile for a dense little peasant who had never learnt sense in all her sixty years and whom the uncharitable might well call witless. Herself a daughter of the petite-noblesse, endowed with good looks and a respectable dowry, she had taken the veil a few years previously; after a disappointment in love, the novices had been known to whisper at recreation. She owed her rapid promotion over the heads of her seniors to her energy, her economy and a boundless capacity for putting things in order. Her fortune had almost

freed the Convent from debt, her reforms had ensured that in her time it should not relapse again. The Reverend Mother, an invalid of more than eighty years, was indisputably a Saint, but there were times when her industrious assistant was put to it not to see her Mother-in-religion as an impracticable, emotional old woman. Nowadays, when rheumatism kept her largely in bed, her activities were providentially curtailed, but even now, given the opportunity—a persistent beggar, an artful tale—one never knew what she might do, though the Convent accounts were only beginning to balance on the right side despite her three years of vigilant retrenchment.

So Mother Assistant hastened to the parlour amid the flapping of skirts, the squeaking of leather, the jangling of beads, to perform her office of looking into things.

She perceived at once that something was wrong—a truly disreputable young woman, in draggled finery with dishevelled hair, traces of paint on her cheeks and mouth and the most disgraceful shoes.

That young man of the world, Brienne, had admired the resemblance to a sinner-saint, the woman who had turned her back on the world shuddered at sight of the classic trappings of depravity. She averted her eyes from the face, she lifted her eyes from the feet, she turned her vision inward and she decided, "One of those loose girls off the streets!"

"What can I do for you?" she inquired reluctantly.

"Am I speaking to Reverend Mother?"

An educated voice, but, in the respected circles of her provincial town, Mother Assistant had learned that an aped gentility may be the hall-mark of such creatures.

"Reverend Mother does not see callers at this hour. What may be your business?"

"Could I see her later? I could await her convenience."

The nun looked straight in front of her.

"Reverend Mother's visiting hours are from two to three, but she is much occupied. She receives important callers only. If you desire me to help you, you had better state your name and business," she added sharply.

Perhaps the wanderer from the streets of Paris had less perception than the woman who had never strayed in the world or out of it. Maybe she was reassured by the externals before her. The spotless coif, the compact leather belt, the jangling beads were a part of her childhood—the happiest

part. Without hesitation, unaided by encouragement, without any stipulation for secrecy, without reservation, blame for others or self-excuse, she poured out her tale.

Mother Assistant was horrified beyond incredulity. She did not ask the girl—she did not even ask herself—if such a scandal could possibly be true. She was stricken dumb. For once in her life she was at a loss, shunned responsibility and knew no desire to put things in order. Her one desire was to hear no more. In her efforts to refuse admission to this corruption her agate eyes filmed, her mouth retreated behind a rigid line. But in the midst of the complete disarray behind her defences one thing stayed plain. The girl in the sodden finery was a lady in a ball dress. She came from a Royal Palace, a sinner of Quality who could not be turned adrift nor bidden seek a Convent for penitents.

She heard herself speaking. "Please sit down, Mademoiselle. Excuse me, I will consult Reverend Mother."

Now she could escape.

The Priest's breakfast was a ritual. A feast not to be interrupted. But Mass once over Mother Assistant could not wait another moment. All through the Service she had been unable to control her thoughts—an instance of the power of evil communications.

The distractions had been unspeakable in their nature. The Novices had been mistaken. Their exemplary mistress, the virgin who had entered religion at the age of thirty-five, had not fled from a disappointment in love; she had never known a flirtation. All her life, sex had been for her the unknown terror. She had clutched her ignorance to her as a buckler, had averted her eyes from the spectacle of an unclothed babe. She feared nakedness like the devil and beauty like the devil's own. Her pupils must walk and talk in threes lest particularity soil childish friendships. Almost she regretted the Kiss of Peace.

Now, without warning, her chaste ears were assailed by the Enemy, disguised, for her greater temptation, in the trappings of royal estate. The King's Mistress!—Satan avant! Mother Assistant might well assure herself that omelette and ham, even M. le Vicaire's omelette and ham, were inconsiderable compared with the necessity of arousing the official champion, armoured as man and priest, to deal with this monstrous intrusion.

M. le Vicair, armoured or defenceless, went on with his breakfast. He sat eating mouthful after mouthful while the tall nun tripped and hesitated and rambled hither and thither in her praiseworthy effort to convey the unspeakable in terms befitting. He did not interrupt. Mother Assistant longed for an interjection more helpful than "God bless my soul!" or "Is it possible?"

But at last breakfast and story ended together; the priest wiped his crust round his empty plate—he was appreciative of good food and condemned all waste.

"It's most like to be a pack of lies," he pronounced, his jaws rotating round the final mouthful. "Just a pack of lies."

Mother Assistant challenged this tepidity, but meekly.

"I thought best to come to you first, Father. Our dear Mother is in poor health as you know. At her age such a shock might be dangerous."

M. le Vicair nodded approval. "Very wise, Mother; you did well. We must be careful. A thing like this must not be allowed to get about. It might do our good young King a lot of harm."

The Priest's round, red face looked thoughtfully at his clean plate. The nun looked at the polished floor.

"Of course there's only one thing to be done," said the Curé of Souls briskly to his plate. Mother Assistant murmured agreement. She had not the slightest idea what the one thing might be.

"We must find out if there's any truth in it."

Mother Assistant agreed again.

M. le Vicair wiped his mouth with his napkin and carefully folded it. "If it's what I suspect, the hysteria of a certain type of woman, not necessarily an unchaste woman, you understand me, Mother" (the nun shut her eyes to the well-kept floor), "but the kind of emotionally unbalanced young woman we priests frequently encounter, she must be clapped up, put under lock and key, so she can't make scandal. On the other hand," the priest gave his plate a sharp considering look, "if there should be any truth in what this girl says she must go somewhere; she can't stay here, of course."

He pushed back his chair and addressed the nun with energy.

"If one of the ladies of the Court had really run away,

there'll be a hue and cry, all sorts of unpleasantness. We don't want the convent mixed up in a public scandal."

Mother's Assistant's nods of assent almost tripped over each other.

"That would never do."

The priest expatiated. "We ought to make inquiries, perhaps a discreet letter to the Palais Royal. No, better to put nothing in writing. One can't be too careful in a case like this. Where did you say her parents lived?"

"She said her father was dead and her mother at Blois. It may not be true, of course. I felt that at the time."

"We can't go to them then. No, no. The correct thing is to inquire at the Palais. I must think. Dear me! Now I wonder—do you know anyone at the Palais Royal, Mother?"

"Not nowadays, I fear, unfortunately," Mother Assistant's tone conveyed that she might easily have done so last year or the year before.

"I used to know a lady," began the priest, "a person of position. Not exactly of the Court, but her husband is a Minister. An under Minister," he corrected himself conscientiously. "Madame Colbert; Rue des Petits-Pères I think they live now. Maybe you are acquainted with the family, Mother? A most respectable one."

He rose. "That's an idea. This lady might be able to assist us. At least she could advise us how best to approach the appropriate quarter at the Palais. Yes! that's what I'll do. I'll go there myself, Mother."

Mother Assistant approved warmly. Nothing could be better. The priest looked round for his hat, and, as she found and gave it to him inquired, "What did you say the name was? I'd best write it down, I think. La Vallière, that's it, La V-all-i-ère."

"Perhaps you would wish to have a word with her before you go, M. le Vicaire."

He shook his head emphatically. "Not necessary at all, not at this stage."

Again Mother Assistant agreed, and shuddered.

Mme de Navailles had passed a poor night. The problem of how to prosecute inquiries without arousing curiosity baffled her. The girl must be found. She was responsible for her not only to Madame but to the relatives, whoever they

might be. But it was imperative to proceed carefully. Scandals were so easily set in motion, so difficult to arrest. The reputation of one of her charges was in question, her own reputation for vigilance was at stake. Her careless young Mistress might not attribute this extraordinary disappearance to lack of supervision, but what if it came to the ears of that far more exacting authority, the Queen-Mother of France?

Wretched little chit! There had been nothing but trouble with her; it all came from admitting a little bourgeoisie into her high-born troupe. Once the girl was found she, herself, would press for her dismissal. Meanwhile, Madame must be informed of the doorkeeper's story. So far Henriette knew nothing beyond the maid of honour's failure to attend last night. Mme de Navailles had persuaded her Princess that La Vallière was just hiding somewhere, in some other bedroom probably, in order to escape merited rebuke.

As she prepared to go to Madame's apartments, her footman announced a caller. M. le Vicaire du Bois, from Chaillot.

Another annoyance, if a minor one. This would be a priest from the fashionable Visitation Convent, the foundation at Chaillot of which the Queen-Mother of England was benefactress and where Princess Henriette had been a pupil. Another of Madame's impulsive charities, doubtless, promised without reflection one day, forgotten the next. Madame could never recognize that her privy purse was empty; worse than empty with the dressmakers' and jewellers' bills unpaid. Meanwhile the disagreeable task of disappointing tactfully must be shouldered by her chief Lady-in-Waiting.

"Tell him I'm engaged," she snapped.

Henriette, in a pale lemon *négligée* smothered in lace, a cup of freshly frothed chocolate and the *Gazette de France* on her toilet table, was in the hands of her hairdresser, the famous Mlle La Borde.

Philip, a composition in turquoise, chamber robe, night-cap, satin shoes with preposterous heels, finger nails beautifully tinted to match, reclined on a black brocade divan. He was peeling an orange with slow, languid movements and tossing the peel all over the room. He threw it to excite the spaniels who, chasing each fragment, yelped their disappointment indefatigably. The din was ear-splitting. Mme de Navaille longed to scream at him to stop.

"Well?" queried Madame pettishly. She was none too pleased to send off La Borde in the middle of the most intriguing of cabbage curls. (The new curls were going to suit her to perfection.)

"What is it that's so pressing? You know I'm due at the Farewell audience to the Spanish Ambassador directly. Can't it wait till afterwards, whatever it may be?"

The young Madame refused to take the matter seriously. She counselled the Mistress of the Maids not to bother her head about a ridiculous girl. "Good riddance to bad rubbish, I say." Henriette finished her chocolate and surveyed herself in her mirror. She fingered that lovely shell of curls. "Have you tried M. Fouquet's?" she threw over a shoulder.

Mme de Navailles was shocked. Madame might be only seventeen, but for all she had been brought up in Paris, the coarse island blood showed. No young French girl of breeding would have made such a suggestion in front of a husband, whatever she might have thought.

"I beg your pardon, Madame," she objected primly.

"Well, I should have thought it obvious!" The thin shoulders shrugged. "You say she went out with Fouquet's man at two in the morning. I take it he came for her! Very amusing!"

"I ask your Royal Highness's pardon," the second apology was a reprimand. "I said *after* M. le Surintendant's valet, not *with* him."

"Well, with or after—what does it matter? What can I do?"

Mme de Navailles spoke her mind now. "With your Royal Highness's approval, I suggest consulting the Queen-Mother."

Henriette's approval was not forthcoming. She had no intention of foregoing the one advantage of a married woman—to be Mistress in her own house.

"Not at all necessary." She spoke crossly. Philip had risen languidly, and she was determined he should not escape any trouble or responsibility which might be ahead. "Monsieur, do you hear all this? I'm not prudish, far from it, but really one must draw the line somewhere! I'll be mighty obliged if you'll request your friend the Surintendant to keep his protégée altogether from now on—day as well as night! Where are you off to now, Monsieur?"

Philip sent her an innocent look. "Just a cold douche, angel; Mme de Navailles has given me a shock. I fear the vapours are before me. I see trouble. O deary me. La! La! A very cold douche, unavoidable!"

He drifted away. Henriette called after him imperiously. "Send La Borde, please, and be sure you're not late for the Audience. Ten precisely, remember! The least we can do is to be nice to poor Don Cristofal. He can't be very content with us, sending him home just because the French must squabble with the Spaniards in London. It's not his fault if people will be so stupid."

Her husband blew a kiss from his turquoise finger-tips.

"We French are born fighting-cocks, my English Placida!"

"Affected little beast!" thought Henriette, as she turned Mme de Navailles away and abandoned her head to clever La Borde.

Mme de Navailles returned to her quarters more worried than ever. She could not decide what was the best course to pursue. In view of Madame's attitude she hesitated to consult Queen Anne; to approach M. Fouquet was a very dubious proceeding. Could one, perhaps, pay Madame Fouquet a visit, a very discreet one? No, really one could not! I shall go distracted, thought the unfortunate lady.

Finally she decided to call herself on the Surintendant; a most unpleasant errand, but she was courageous and at bottom conscientious. She had a duty to the girl as well as to herself.

Mantled and hooded in unobtrusive black, she was about to set forth when her maid ventured a reminder. "What about the reverend gentleman, Madame? Is he to await your return?"

Mme de Navailles sighed her vexation. Really, this was too bad! Just when she was up to her eyes in trouble! But she knew what was due to herself and to the Church. She pulled up her hood, took up her black Spanish gloves and sailed to the ante-room, a picture of a great lady without a minute to spare.

"Good day, M. l'Abbé. Pray forgive me. I am desolated to have detained you so long, but I have only just arrived. And now, unfortunately I have to depart again immediately on most urgent business. I can just spare one moment, if you'll tell me in what way I can be of service to you."

The priest gave the lady a doubtful look. Had he the honour of speaking to Mme de Navailles herself? Assured on this point, he informed her that he had come on the recommendation of Mme Colbert, of Rues des Petits-Pères. His errand concerned one of the young ladies in Madame's charge—a Mlle de la Vallière.

Acting on the advice of the husband of his most respectable acquaintance, the Curé was very reserved. Beyond stating where the fugitive was to be found he said little. But that little was everything to his hearer. On learning that no scandal need be feared, that no disagreeable visit need be undertaken, that the whole business boiled down was just the reprehensible folly of a wayward girl, she could have embraced the worthy bearer of such glad tidings.

She only regretted that the Privy Purse was in such a poor way. The benevolence grudged to the aristocratic Visitation Convent would have been gladly bestowed on the obscure Sisterhood at the foot of Chaillot Hill.

Louis had spent the greater part of his night regretting the quarrel. He had begun with blaming Louise, he ended by blaming himself. Fouquet he damned heartily in both moods. From daybreak onward he cogitated how he might best climb down without loss of dignity. It seemed impossible to visit the Palais Royal till after the audience to the Spanish Ambassador, and a letter to Louise was always a risky matter. She hadn't even a room to herself, he thought resentfully.

The excited Philip arrived ten minutes before Don Cristofal was due to be announced. On learning that Mlle de la Vallière had walked out of the house in the middle of the night with M. Fouquet's valet, the King turned so red that his brother was alarmed.

"Is the Surintendant outside—for the Audience?"

Philip stared at the furious face.

"I'm going to break that damned swine!"

Monsieur was frankly appalled. "My God, Louis, you can't do a thing like that! What d'you mean? It's not a crime, even if he has run off with your girl. She's not your wife; she's free to sleep with Fouquet if she chooses. Mighty poor taste on her part when she could have you, I must say," he added consolingly, "but there's no accounting for women; the less you have to do with 'em the better—that's why I keep clear of 'em. Louis, don't!"

Philip laid his hand over the bell—this was serious—this must be stopped. "I wouldn't have told you if I'd any idea you'd take it like this. Plague take it! Louis, do listen to reason! It's striking ten, the Ambassador will be waiting. Fouquet will be in the hall already. You can't make a scene at the Audience. We're on mighty bad terms with Spain already. Do you want to insult the Ambassador? Do you want to make yourself a laughing-stock for all France—and Spain into the bargain?" He brought out with inspiration, "Your father-in-law and those stuck-up Dons would just relish a laugh at your expense!"

"Damn Spain!"

But he knew his brother was right. Standing there, a regal figure in his ermine and purple, the star of St. Louis shining on his breast, the blue riband of the Holy Ghost across it, the young man, boiling with hatred, had to confess his desire impossible. Policy, common sense, must take precedence of a furious revenge. His Minister's fall must be demonstrated to the world as just retribution for offences against the State, not as the King's jealous vengeance on one who had supplanted him in the favour of a flighty young woman.

Moreover, was not Fouquet protected by his office? To arrest him would range the whole of the Parlement on the side of their Procureur-Général.

He seized his brother's arm. Come then, let's get this cursed Spanish business finished."

As they crossed the ante-chamber a short man in brown, carrying a black velvet bag under his arm and a crushed hat in his hand, stepped forward. M. Colbert proffered a letter. "Your Majesty may consider it an urgent matter," said the common voice.

Louis accepted the letter with indifference. He was not in the mood for his chief clerk's latest intelligence, but he opened it as he walked, from force of habit.

Don Cristofal de Gaviria, representative of His Most Catholic Majesty to the Very Christian King, had a poor opinion of the Court he was about to quit. The grave Hidalgo, steeped in the inflexible tradition of Philip II, deplored the frivolity of the French. It was more improper even than their presumption. They did well to push themselves in front of Spanish Ambassadors in foreign capitals, a

people to whom the very rudiments of decorum were a closed book. All the more was he determined that his public leave-taking of the ill-mannered young King of France, who had demanded his recall to mark his preposterous resentment with a country he had done his utmost to offend, should be conducted with all proper ceremony. He entered the Royal Audience Chamber of the Louvre, encased in magnificent black, obstinate in the unfashionable mode of the great days of the old diplomacy when Ambassadors were regarded as the images of Kings. His thin white hair was plastered down without a curl, his neck imprisoned in an ample stiffly-starched ruff. His three solemn reverences made, he commenced on his oration. It had taken him a week to compose, a fortnight to correct and had exhausted three secretaries. It was a masterpiece of dignified reproach—scholarly regret; it skated most delicately on thinnest ice. He recited it slowly as befitted the obituary notice—which it was.

On conclusion he raised a long, yellow, aristocratic mask on which there was no expression at all. There, on the dais before him, stood the regal group. King—Queen-Mother on right hand—Prince-Brother and wife on left, Princes of the Blood, Chief Ministers of the Crown. M. Fouquet, like the Spaniard all in black but in the height of fashion; fat Le Tellier, badly dressed, his wig on one side as usual; Lionne, he, at least, a man of breeding, who, with his appreciation of what was due to Spain, must surely be ill at ease. Everyone who should be present was present but—something was wrong. The King! Could it be possible—was it credible that a Most Christian Monarch could have so far forgotten himself as to withhold from the Representative of august Spain the honour of his attention? Was His Majesty actually engaged in the perusal of a note? Could he be whispering aside to his feather-brained brother? St. James of Compostella! Was ever Ambassador so outrageously insulted?

Don Cristofal permitted his indignation the vent of a dignified cough. Anne of Austria gave her shameless son an imploring glance. Alone, M. Nicolas Fouquet's amicable glance, directed at the Grandee of Spain, conveyed regret and admiration.

The intolerable silence was broken at last. The King crushed the paper in his hand. Looking straight before

him, with an expression both absent and impatient, for all the world as if he wanted to be gone, he reeled off a short speech. He might have been a breathless scholar repeating a task got by heart, thought the astounded Diplomat.

"M. l'Ambassadeur, I am obliged by your expressions of goodwill. I make no doubt but that His Catholic Majesty will confirm them by according me the satisfaction I require. I am happy to take this occasion to express my regard for yourself personally and to wish you a propitious journey."

A bow, he turned away. The audience was at an end. Without compliments, without hand-kissing, without a single autograph letter, a single message of affection to royal kindred at Madrid.

Although the Queen-Mother advanced to her countryman's rescue with a shower of courtly attentions, with loving messages to her royal brother, her beloved young nephew and nieces, it was a testimony to Don Cristofal's diplomatic training that he accepted a King's insult and a Queen's apology with the same imperturbable courtesy.

Galloping through the crowded streets—it was market day and he sent the loungers scattering to left and right—leaving the inevitable attendants, Captain Maupertuis and two of his men, to bear the brunt of black looks and expostulations, he tried to sort his thoughts, to plan his course of action.

He was astounded, perplexed, angry, but above all relieved. Once again he had misjudged her. She was headstrong, she was obstinate, she had treated him badly, but Fouquet had nothing to do with her escape. Beside that fact everything was negligible. Folly could be repaired, her behaviour towards himself forgiven. Everything could be forgiven—except Fouquet. There was no pardon for the man to whose heavy account was now added the quarrel, the flight, and whatever consequences might come of it; above all the black moment in which he had pictured himself as a young dupe fooled at the orders of a successful and hated rival. Everything was added to the indictment mounting against the criminal who had robbed France—whose hour, even yet, had not struck.

As for Louise, what a reckless girl! What a hair-brained escapade! She might have been murdered, raped—a child of seventeen wandering alone in Paris slums at the dead

of night ! Not a woman in his world would have dared it. He marvelled at such folly, but it never occurred to him that it was of a piece with the recklessness which had sent her to her adventure with himself. She did well to urge the necessity of keeping their secret to themselves, he thought. She had only herself to thank if every soul in the Palais Royal and possibly in the Louvre was at present chattering eighteen to the dozen !

If he were not careful, Marie Thérèse would be asking questions next. Yet, desperately as he desired to keep the affair from his wife, never for one moment did he hesitate. Louise was gone. There was only one thing to do—get her back as quickly as might be ! There was only one person he could trust to do that—himself. But there should be no more of such escapades, he promised himself. He'd managed clumsily last night, lost his head and his temper. He'd do better this time, not permit her to exasperate him, whatever she might say. At the bottom of all these reflections and resolutions lay an unswerving determination. He'd have the truth out of her about Fouquet's letter if it took him all day !

Sister Portress answered the bell. The bell ringing over and over again. Someone in rather a hurry ! Not a lover out of his senses ; a King waiting to be obeyed.

" I'm coming," she cried to the closed shutter. " Praised be Jesus Christ," she whispered as she drew it back. " What is it, please ? "

" The King's business " meant little to her. Probably the collector of taxes—he'd been an impatient gentleman last time. But she didn't forget her orders again as when she'd admitted the poor young lady now fast asleep on the parlour floor.

" Wait a moment, please ; I'll ask Mother Assistant."

" Oh dear, some folks can't bide an instant," she remonstrated gently as she hastened back to the house and the bell clanged forth once more.

The tall nun met her in the doorway. She, too, seemed in a hurry and quite upset. The Portress expected a rebuke for all that noise, but Mother Assistant only asked breathlessly whom it was.

" A gentleman on the King's business ! You must admit him, of course. Ask for an authority, a piece of paper, a letter, something to show. Quickly, Sister. I don't want

our Mother to be disturbed." She vanished and the Portress ran down to the gate again. She was as quick as she could be, but scarcely had she unlocked before the visitor had pushed past her and was in the house.

He had planned to shape his attitude to hers, to be reproachful, on his dignity, apologetic, loving, as might best fit the case, but he had not foreseen the reality. Not a wilful girl who had contrived to set a Court in an uproar and might yet bring a catastrophe on his head and her own, not the audacious slammer of doors, scarcely even his darling young lover. At the sight of her lying on the ground in her sad abandonment, his love soared. He beheld her in a new light, himself for once forgotten. If his eyes could not see those stones as the barren bed to which love for him had already brought her, if he could not hear that the moments flying like the wind were charged with her last escape, yet he saw her with compassion—a child who had cried herself to sleep.

Quietly he knelt down by her, gently he touched her cold hand, very tenderly he watched the grave, unresponsive face. He was shocked by her pallor, by the darkness beneath the white eyelids. What a state she was in! Damp dress, stockings in ribbons, one shoeless foot had bled. Her hands were icy cold. A sudden fear struck him; he sighed his relief on hearing the quiet breath.

But she might catch her death left lying like this by those heartless nuns!

"Louise, my poor darling!" He kissed her forehead, putting back the tangled hair. "Darling, wake up; it's Louis!"

With eyes closed, she murmured, "I can't; I'm so tired," then opening them blankly, saw him, whispered "Oh dear!" and closed them again. He touched her shoulder. "Speak to me, dearest. Do tell me you're all right." She moved as if to withdraw from the touch, opened her eyes again, said, "I'll never go back," and instantly burst into tears.

He broke into protestations. He knew he had been a brute; he could murder himself! "Don't cry, beloved!" No wonder she had run away from such a wretch. No one could blame her—no one should dare blame her! And, as she made no answer only went on softly crying, he laid his

face against hers. "Forgive me, I've been unhappy too ! I haven't slept all night."

At once her hand reached for his. "Poor Louis !" And the next moment, "I can't ever go back !"

She should do exactly as she pleased ; but she was frozen, she was wet through. What were the nuns about to let her lie here in such a state !

At the door he shouted for them.

"Oh hush ! They are not to blame. I fell asleep."

It was a mercy Mother Assistant was on her knees in the Chapel petitioning heaven that the convent should be preserved from all evil, for such an exhibition of indelicacy was never before beheld in that holy place. But Sister Portress was not too shocked to strip off a soaked pink gown, to watch a lady in her petticoats being wrapped in a man's coat. She ran hither and thither, heated up her rough, red wine, purloined M. le Vicaire's white loaf and a slice of his best breakfast ham ; she crouched on the floor and chafed a pair of slim feet, smiling the while her encouragement of a pretty dear who must make a good breakfast, smiling her approval of the young man who had made a poor child happy again.

The pair talked so fast it went over her head, but what she did catch were kind, friendly words. "My poor sweetheart. My treasure ! It's all my fault !" "No, it's mine, dearest !" They disputed over this—a make-believe quarrel. And the young lady took out her lovely green ear-rings and she said, "You may throw them in the Seine if you like." And her friend answered, he was laughing and he said it in the funniest way, "We'll give them to the good Sister here ; she'll find a use for them I'll be bound." And before she could speak there she was sitting on the floor with the pretty, glittering things in her work-a-day apron.

"Are they worth a deal of money, Sir ?"

"Plenty, I should say. Enough to buy yourself an altar or something ! Unless of course you'd prefer to wear them, Sister !" And they laughed at his joke, all three of them together.

It was undoubtedly a blessing Mother Assistant stayed hard at her prayers, for if the arrival had been unseemly the departure was a scandal. The brazen creature was carried out in her lover's arms, her petticoats plain to see under his riding-coat, without shoes or stockings, one might

say bare-legged. The little nun fluttered up the flagged path before the pair, bobbed at the open door, quavered and whispered. She got a kiss from the girl leaning down, one on each faded cheek. "Don't forget to buy something nice for yourself, dear Sister." "Something handsome to remember us by," said the gentleman.

"Oh, never fear, Sir, I'll not forget you." The thin voice died away; the door closed heavily, shut in, shut out, but she never forgot them.

Maupertuis had hired the coach by the hour in his ignorance of their destination—a sensible provision it turned out to be since it was soon bidden to draw up in a cul-de-sac of the Cours-la-Reine. In the coach the lovers sat side by side on the shabby leather-covered seat; she in his riding-coat, resting against him, her bare feet cuddled in the crown of his upturned feathered hat; her hair, tied now by a ribbon torn from his sleeve, sprayed over his shoulder. He, in his wide, lawn shirt-sleeves under the gorgeous violet vest of his costume of ceremony, listened attentively to the little she had to tell. Her dread of the women at the Palais Royal; that she could not go back, she could not go home, that she did not know where she could go. She disposed of her night's wandering in a sentence—no one had molested her; of the Convent in another—they had been very kind to admit her. She ceased with a sigh and closed her eyes.

After a moment he inquired blandly and as if he had never put the question before, "You dear goose, what is all this about M. Fouquet?" As if she had never refused to tell him, she answered at once. It was only much ado about nothing; a storm in a teacup. M. Fouquet only desired to know something about an Office—did the King wish him to sell it or not? Louise had forgotten the name of the Office—something legal, she believed. Louis would know what it was. She roused herself to some animation when asking how could she refuse when he'd just been so kind, lending her all that money for her brother? No, she had no idea why M. Fouquet had asked her to keep his name out of the business, or indeed why he had asked *her* assistance at all. Of course she had told him nothing of their relationship. Surely Louis did not think her so foolish?

He hastened to assure her mendaciously of his confidence

in her discretion, on which she astonished him by saying, "But I told the nun."

He evinced nothing of his annoyance—merely remarked it would be wiser to tell no one else at present, and for some moments they sat in silence.

"I do hope you'll never be jealous of him again," she murmured with her eyes closed and leaning more heavily against him. "I couldn't bear it again."

Louis embarked on another assurance.

"All the same, I'll not answer his letter. It's made us both unhappy, and now I've broken my word to him. If I answer, more unhappiness is sure to follow. I feel it. He must ask you himself. I don't know why he doesn't ask you himself."

Louis made no comment. He sat silent, the girl embraced, leaning her weight against him and fallen a little lower in the seat.

He contemplated her thus, half asleep and wholly unconscious of his thought. He deliberated. He was reluctant to use her for his ends. The very innocence of her secret reproached the ruthlessness of his own. The idea of Louise, a decoy to trap a traitor to his death, was repugnant. His ideal should have stayed far outside the crooked paths of a man-hunt. Yet, here to his hand, tempting him, she appeared as the very instrument for which he had sought for months.

Fouquet had suspected Le Tellier, had ignored Colbert, he would trust Louise. And, whatever her simplicity might imagine, the Surintendant's very request proved him under no delusion as to Mlle de la Vallière's standing with the King.

Now he was regarding her stealthily, denying the child who had sobbed herself to sleep. The arousing hand which smoothed away the hair from her forehead was steady, the voice which defied his conscience was firm.

"You can hardly treat him like that."

She lay silent against him.

"Did you hear what I said, Louise?"

It might have been a drowsy murmur; it might have been the voice of his good angel proffering him a last chance,

"No, I didn't hear."

"Listen, my cherished, and then I'll not bother you any more. You can hardly leave his letter unanswered."

Her eyes remained closed.

"If you don't wish to write, why not go and see him? After all, he seems to have tried to befriend you. You could tell him what my mind is."

He watched her face as she replied softly and always without opening her eyes. "But I don't know what you have in mind."

"It would be more convenient if he resigned from the office of Procureur-Général." He spoke with quiet distinctness. "Tell him that, you don't need to say more. He will understand."

With a rush of relief he escaped to a side issue. "And pay him what you owe him, Louise."

She opened her eyes. "I can't. How can I? I have no money."

He had the grace to feel the shame of the lesser injury.

"My dearest, why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you come to me?"

She said unsmiling, a flush in her cheeks, "I don't want you to give me money—ever."

"And I don't want anyone else to give it to you—ever."

In the would-be light retort he was assuring himself that in all that really mattered his treatment of her was unimpeachable. He expostulated affectionately. Did she think him a miser, or what? To provide for her was his duty as well as his privilege. Of course he would send her any sum required (by way of Colbert, he added on reflection). But on one thing he must insist. She must promise to clear this debt, and never to apply to anyone else again. "Promise," he repeated.

He had the impression of a withdrawal as she sat up and looked at him rather sadly.

"Oh, don't ask me to promise. I might break it again."

As he drew her back against him, he fancied a resistance. Impelled to overcome it, he redoubled his tenderness, compassionated her weariness, praised her courage, bade her have no fear of Madame, or anyone, henceforth. He would make everything right for her; everything was going to be perfect from now on. "Only love me, Louise; love me and trust me always."

Maupertuis, leading his Master's horse, sitting his own, enduring the long wait and the rain with philosophic patience,

was bidden to the window. "Hôtel Colbert. On arriving pray Madame Colbert to come out to me."

The coach, leaving the smooth sanded Cours-la-Reine jolted and rumbled over the cobble stones of the city streets. The springless vehicle staggered from side to side; it clattered and groaned while Paris, wrapped in a weeping mist, seemed as if mourning this procession through her barriers.

CHAPTER XII

SEPTEMBER 4TH, 1661

*The King said . . . that M. Fouquet was a dangerous man.
Mme de Sévigné.*

LÉOMÉNIE DE BRIENNE strolled along the streets of Nantes. He walked in the sun, he sauntered. The fine September afternoon was a pleasant setting for pastoral sights. Sturdy peasants urging on their dog-drawn carts, healthy country girls with their milk-pails or hurrying their goats and sheep. Léoménie had the fancy to linger over the stalls in the market-place, to flirt for a moment with a pretty Breton maiden who turned on her heel, with a swish of bright blue petticoats—she didn't let strangers kiss her, and thank you, Sir!

Decidedly, thought Brienne, who had never done a hand's turn in all his days, life might be very pleasant in the country. In his own estimation he was at work that moment, on an errand, not a pressing affair—no need to hurry on a visit of courtesy. The King desired news of M. Fouquet's health and had despatched his gentleman-in-waiting, with his compliments and his condolences to the Minister so unfortunately confined to his bed in the middle of the State visit to Nantes.

Brienne, of course, was housed with his Sovereign at his headquarters in the Castle. The Ministers in attendance, M. Le Tellier and the Surintendant, had their lodgings in the town. The latter, whose wife had accompanied him from Paris (Mme Fouquet was anxious concerning the chill from which her husband had suffered intermittently for

some weeks past) had established himself in commodious quarters near the Place de la Cathédrale.

He certainly knows how to make himself comfortable, thought Brienne, on entering the fine fifteenth-century house where obviously modern comforts and elegancies had been dispatched from Paris to ameliorate a week's exile in a provincial desert. As he ascended the staircase he was met by sounds of music, laughter and applause. In a large, well-furnished chamber the invalid lay on a day-bed, supported by pink satin cushions and covered by a quilt of bright embroidery. Roses, books and wine were set out on a table by the couch. On a stool at the foot sat a little grey-haired man with a pale studious face—M. Fouquet's protégé, Péliisson the author.

Another of these scribblers, thought Brienne, who, regarding a Court Poet as indispensable, despised all serious writers as superfluous wasters of good paper. But he admired the sight of Madeline Fouquet, a fragile, smiling creature with bright brown curls and delicately tinted cheeks, sitting on one of the cushions, her back supported by the bed, a wave of green muslin skirts billowing all round her slender body.

At the end of the room some nine or ten gypsies, handsome, olive-skinned young women, in their traditional costume, were giving an entertainment. Their snowy, pleated bodices emerged stiffly from black velvet corsets laced across the bosom and embossed in gold and silver. They danced on a carpet in stout leather shoes and knitted white stockings. Their short scarlet skirts swung with each movement as they tapped their ribboned tambourines on their knees and jingled them over bright kerchiefed heads. The leading Zingane sat in the midst of the troupe and, guitar in hand, sang in a rich contralto :

*"Viens danser avec moi dans les champs,
Oheu mais il fait beau ;
D'être heureux il n'est pas toujours temps,
Qu'il fait beau aujourd'hui."*

M. de Brienne was welcomed with cordiality. How kind to take pity on their dullness. Madame offered to dismiss the Breton singers, but Léoménie would not hear of it. He would like nothing better than to make one of the audience.

"One cannot forego such a treat in a tedious hole like Nantes, dear Madame."

So he sat among them, sipping their good wine, appreciating the voices, admiring the lady with the white neck and the bright curls falling over it, and now and again sparing a glance for his host.

In an interval he acquitted himself of his commission. He was delighted to find M. le Surintendant in better case than he had anticipated. From what His Majesty had said he looked to find a helpless invalid. The King, with whose regrets and good wishes he wished to associate himself, was deeply concerned. He would be happy to send his own physician that very day.

M. Fouquet smiled from his pillows. He was most sensible of His Majesty's graciousness, of the friendliness of M. de Brienne; the royal offer was kindness itself, but he was already on the mend. The worst was over.

"He makes light of it." The pretty young wife spoke up from the floor. "Nicolas always makes light of trouble. He's been mighty sick—is it not so, M. Péliçon? If you'd but seen him last night, M. le Comte; I thought his teeth would never cease chattering. He shivered all over, fit to shake the covers off the bed."

M. Péliçon's quiet voice was heard. "M. le Surintendant is not out of the wood yet."

M. Fouquet smiled on his friends. He stroked his wife's hair and said she wanted to make an old man of him. It was a conspiracy of coddling. "My wife wouldn't let a breath of wind blow on me if she had her way. Don't let's talk about my health, wretched topic. How is the King, M. de Brienne?"

The change of subject was no improvement for the gentleman-in-waiting. What was there interesting in a man who never ailed, insisted on going miles in all weathers, kept his hat off in the rain and kept his love affairs to himself? His Majesty was shooting to-day, hunting to-morrow and, Brienne added internally, scribbling love-letters, or more likely love-verses all evening. (The last occupation being one for which he had no aptitude whatever, and upon which Léoménie flattered himself.) Aloud he made the inquiry with which he was charged.

"Do you anticipate you will be fit to do business with the King to-morrow, M. le Surintendant?"

Madame replied, "I don't think he should attempt it for a day or two. I'm sure His Majesty would be the last to wish him to take risks, don't you agree, M. le Comte?"

Léoménie agreed absolutely. He added that the King had expressly desired him to state that M. le Surintendant need not worry. If he was not in health to attend at the Castle to-morrow, His Majesty would make shift with M. Colbert's assistance for the Marine accounts now in hand. "I know nothing of the Marine," said careless Brienne, "but I'd advise you to leave business to that clerk fellow, my dear Surintendant. He and the King'll have a jolly morning casting up figures and trying to make one pistole stretch to ten. More in their line than yours, my friend. Why not bidc snugly here and leave them to it?"

M. Fouquet smiled at Brienne's little dig at his industrious Prince, but the idea of Colbert at his accounts was not pleasant; he determined to be back in harness to-morrow. He was weary of being shut up indoors, he professed. A walk, a couple of hours at work would do him all the good in the world. He promised his wife that on his return from the Castle he would rest for the remainder of the day. He turned the conversation and, nothing loth, Brienne launched forth on topics which he fancied would amuse his hostess, and on which he considered himself an authority. Mutual acquaintances were passed in review. He mimicked Monsieur's girlish intimates in a high falsetto voice, dropped a light scorn on English fashions at the Palais Royal. Flying higher, he touched on Madame's new cavalier, the Comte de Guiche. This latter should be grateful to Mlle de la Vallière for this promotion, and no doubt he was. It was all the mode to admire Mlle de la Vallière nowadays. Very discreet admiration, be it understood. "*La presse n'est pas si grand de soupirer pour elle, quoiqu'elle soit si propre à faire soupirer*," as our friend Benserade puts it so neatly."

Mme Fouquet, rather out of touch with Court circles of late, listened with interest.

"And you, M. le Comte, tell me what you think of her? Is she so mighty pretty really, this Mlle de la Vallière?"

"What do I think, Madame?" He made a gesture of blowing away a feather. "As a courtier I hold that whatever the sun shines on is pure gold!"

Madame bestowed her pretty laugh on this conceit, but

the invalid from his couch spoke. "A fitting simile for that lady—pure gold." His tone was thoughtful, his brown eyes absent as if they looked beyond the room.

Noting his gravity his wife changed the talk in her turn. She called back the gypsies—M. de Brienne might like to hear that little ballad again.

While the singer was tuning her guitar, the dark-eyed chorus ranging itself to right and left of her, while Pélisson searched for the words in a manuscript, and Brienne endeavoured to catch the eye of the prettiest gypsy (the little one, second on the left)—Madeline Fouquet leant over her husband. As she passed her cool, scented handkerchief over his hot forehead, no one but he heard her whisper, "If I'd my way, I'd run off with you to Italy to-day, darling."



The room which had been assigned for the King's study during his sojourn in Nantes and where he worked daily with his Ministers, was light and cheerful. One side the windows looked on to the courtyard, the other on to a spacious view of gardens and orchards.

To-day, the fifth of September, all windows were wide to the warm morning and the mellow autumn sunshine; Louis, alone at his desk, wrote incessantly. He wrote to make the time pass, to control his thoughts.

It was a weakness to keep turning over the matter. It was planned to the last detail. Troops, on pretext of drill, were assembled in the fields outside the Castle, ready to march on Fouquet's stronghold of Belle Isle the moment his capture was effected. D'Artagnan and his subordinate, Maupertuis, were the officers charged with it. The latter was already at his post in the courtyard. The senior was to take up his position at eleven o'clock precisely, ready to arrest the Minister as he left the Castle after his audience with the King. Colbert, who knew everything, waited in the room without; Le Tellier, who knew very little, and that only since yesterday, kept him company.

Louis had shut himself up in his study ever since his return from Mass. He had no more orders to give and the idea of unnecessary talking was more repugnant than ever to him during this prelude to the part he would presently have to play in the final act of his Surintendant's Ministry.

So, to occupy himself, he wrote to his brother, to his wife,

to King Charles of England. Only to Louise he did not write ; time enough for that afterwards.

Supposing he failed to come ? Supposing he had suffered a relapse. It would be a hateful thing to drag a sick man from his bed ; despite her screams, from the arms of his wife ! It would bring odium on this first exhibition of the King's justice, and the prisoner would gain abundant popular sympathy without that.

At the thought that he had not dared arrest the man in Paris because of his popularity, had been obliged to stoop to the petty dissimulations of this hundred miles journey in his company, the handsome young face darkened. It was sullen as he went over the track down which he had hunted his Minister ever since the morning of Mazarin's death, the first day of his own freedom, the first of his suspicion. He had worked hard the following six months—he had been fortunate in finding the perfect assistant in Colbert. They had sifted evidence, interviewed witnesses, selected, rejected, decided on the charges for the lawyers, deluded the victim all the time, flattered him with important negotiations, with the prospect of greater things to come, tricked him into parting with his one defence. Louis had been delighted at the news that the Surintendant was no longer Procureur-Général. " *Tout va bien, ils'enterre de lui-meme.*" That night he had celebrated largely, had danced at the Palais Royal till midnight and stayed with Louise till four in the morning. He assured himself that he had been scrupulously just. The prisoner would stand his trial for offences against the State before a competent Tribunal ; be sentenced according to its findings. The Sovereign would not appear in it ; it would be the Judges' business. For them to decide the fate of one who had played traitor to his Country for twelve years ; robbed her, weakened her defences, starved her armies, corrupted his subordinates, enriched his accomplices, lived in incredible luxury while the population paid and starved and the King borrowed and was ashamed.

Saving for one detail, the use he had made of Louise, he was proud of his achievement—this day of reckoning. But he had taught himself to put the exception out of his mind. There were more important considerations for a Ruler than sentimental scruples.

Ten o'clock. Notwithstanding Brienne's assurance, suppose he failed to come ? The Doctors had described how

suddenly these ague attacks came on. He might be prostrate in bed, unable to be moved for days. Only a postponement, but he had no excuse to linger at Nantes with the States open and no business to be done. One could scarcely delay just to watch M. Fouquet getting strong enough to be sent to prison. The wretched business had been hanging over his head long enough ; it must be finished with here and now, and himself set free to return to Paris and other things.

It was a fortnight since he had seen Louise. But she was unreal in this ordeal of waiting. Beauty remote, faint, of no authority. He had no lover as he sat there writing of unrelated matters, no mother with a disturbing pain in her breast, no wife, deceived but soon to bring his child to birth—these were strangers in the room where he waited for a man to come.

If he did not come? Supposing it should not be illness at all? A feint. Supposing he had got wind of what was afoot and had escaped! He had friends and influence everywhere. All over France doors would fly open, horses stand saddled, coaches be ready furnished, men hastening to give aid to the fugitive, to wish him God speed on his race to the frontier. Once across and the King might whistle for his defaulting subject. His mother had been thus defied by rebellious Condé in the bad old days for years on end. King Louis could sit in Paris, a mortal enemy at large, with one fortune in Milan, another in Holland. A welcome guest for Spain or the Burgher Republic with his intimate knowledge of the weakness of France, for anyone who wished to humble her, to divide her with Civil War again.

He laid down his quill and prayed that Fouquet would come.

He came, *en prince*, preceded by pages, saluted by the colleagues without, ceremoniously announced, the royal pleasure evoked.

"M. le Surintendant de Finance, may it please your Majesty."

The blood which raced through his veins boiled, then froze. For a moment he dreaded lest, crimson in his face, it might betray him. He extended his hand and the kiss touched the hot young fingers, light as a breath.

"I am happy to see you in improved health, M. le Surintendant."

Fouquet straightened his back stiffly.

"I am more than happy to be able to wait on Your Majesty to-day."

The formal words were uttered cheerfully. He looked at ease though perhaps rather pale, the face a little sunk.

"If I'd listened to my doctors I should have been deprived of this great pleasure, Sir."

"I take it," said Louis, resuming his seat and motioning to the other to sit opposite, "that your physicians think you should have remained in bed?"

The Surintendant lowered himself into a chair. "Doctors, Sir, are not infallible though they like to imagine themselves so. I've often found work, exercise, a ride in the open air more beneficial than all the physick. I envied Your Majesty your afternoon with the guns yesterday. I hope you enjoyed good sport, Sir?"

As he sat there, smiling at the young man opposite, he might have been an indulgent father, admiring but something wistfully, the youth and health he has left behind.

They set to work. Papers were produced, compared, discussed. While thus engaged Louis's eyes were drawn to the other's down-bent face, to the swollen knuckles lying on the white papers. No, he did not look a healthy man; the eyelids were puffy and darkish purple, the mouth sagged, the body slumped in the chair, the fashionable black and white velvets adorned with bunches of carnation ribbon hung on it dejectedly.

But not for long; a chance in the conversation led Fouquet to the subject of administrative reform. He warmed, and Louis, his eye on the slow-moving clock, led him on. There was little real business to be done, and the man must be kept here till eleven at least. From details Fouquet enlarged to the general, till presently Louis found himself listening to a project. He had heard plans before, Colbert had put forward suggestions, but such as this was undreamed of in the Chief Clerk's careful, practical propositions. Bold, far-reaching, audacious, completely novel to the spirit of the age; it towered. Even Louis, his mind pre-occupied and prejudiced, could not but perceive the genius of the main feature. One tax levelled on all according to means, with no exemption for Nobility or Church; to be collected locally, thus saving expenditure, the collectors to be paid by and responsible to the Central Administration only; no

farming out, no intermediaries. A clean sweep of past abuses, a fresh start, the population immeasurably relieved, and the King's revenues doubled. The Chief Financier sat upright; he challenged Louis with bright, enthusiastic eyes. He looked again a handsome man in early middle life.

Louis affected lightness. "A splendid scheme. Why, you should have brought this forward before, M. le Surintendant. We might have been rich to-day instead of bankrupt."

"I have long thought of it, Sir, in the Cardinal's days, but he judged it Utopian folly. But I hoped, even then, to live to see a day under Your Majesty's very different rule when such a thing might come to pass for France."

Louis rose. "You have interested me, M. le Surintendant."

He went to the window overlooking the Courtyard and glanced below, while affecting to be engaged with a table drawer. Maupertuis there as before, no D'Artagnan yet but he was still not due for ten minutes. He spoke over his shoulder.

"Have you those lists for the Marine?"

M. Fouquet felt slightly surprised at this forgetfulness. He had handed the lists to His Majesty at his last visit, the day before he had fallen sick.

"Why so you did," said Louis carelessly. "I seem to have mislaid them. Will you kindly see if they are in these files. I may possibly have placed them there."

By the irony of Fate, or the poetry of justice, or the narrow limits of human invention stooping to deceit, the Minister, at this, his last meeting with his Sovereign in the Castle of Nantes, was deluded according to the pattern of trickery employed by himself after his first audience in the Castle of Vincennes. Then it had been Louis who had searched for a paper in vain; now it was the turn of Nicolas Fouquet. The young King's hunt had lasted longer, Fouquet's was for ten minutes only, till Louis advanced from the table by the window.

"I shall doubtless find it. I'll not detain you longer, M. le Surintendant."

The other replaced the documents. He rose.

"There is nothing else in which I can serve Your Majesty?"

"I thank you, that will be all. I trust your health will continue to improve."

He must add that and other courtesies. Must give his hand again, again endure, for the last time, thank God, that breath-like touch on his fingers. The rejuvenated figure walked briskly to the door, turned at it and gave the King a parting smile.

It was gay, confident, affectionate, Fouquet's last smile.

The window was not an opening to fresh air and sunlight. It was a thing of fear, a terrifying attraction as of a spyhole into a dungeon, a vantage spot overlooking a scaffold. The air it admitted was stifling, the sunshine burned with his shame. Coward! that dare not behold what servants do at your behest and in your Royal name. Look or be humbled.

He compelled himself to the window, he looked down, a greyness before his eyes, a buzzing in his ears. He looked holding his breath. The sun played with the shadows of the lime trees. They were shadows of golden leaves dancing in the sun. There was nothing else.

Someone rushing, breathless, gasping; Mauvertuis, who had sat his horse in the rain on a day when lovers kissed, and love was betrayed that this thing might come to pass.

"Escaped, Sire! He was talking to M. la Feuillade, and D'Artagnan missed him."

Louis's voice held a dreadful patience.

"And you stand here talking! Go back. Tell D'Artagnan to take him wherever he may be—from his bed—from church—he is to be taken to-day. You hear! Go!"

The window was a window. From it one could hear singers, women's voices, loud and young and gay.

*"Viens avec moi danser dans les champs,
D'être heureux il n'est pas toujours temps."*

The gypsies sang on their way to another house than Fouquet's.

Later he sat down and wrote to his mother. He wrote steadily without a break.

"MADAME MA MÈRE,

"The Surintendant was arrested by my orders in the Place du Cathédral . . ."

Another :

"MY DEAREST LOVE,

"I fear you will grieve at the news I send you. I have been obliged to place M. Fouquet under provisional arrest . . . treated with every consideration . . . the hope that he may speedily clear himself. . . . Do not discuss the matter with anyone till I am returned which will be very shortly, but is too long for one who counts the hours till he can hold you in his arms again."

That autumn was a bounteous, lingering time. Of clear-hued dawns, of drowsy noons steeped in sunshine, of mellow evenings, sun-painted, still ; accepting the hint of chill with gentle resignation. A time of laden downbent orchards, of yellow fields burning to gold, of Michaelmas daisies clustering thick as lilac, of golden-rod a-murmur with busy golden flies ; a season of such arresting beauty that the year, like some reluctant parting lover, must turn back to hold it in a last embrace.

In the grey fortress of Amboise, the rich treasury of October might shrink to a pitiful gold, a thin ray creeping through a window grating, a spectral weaver knitting a criss-cross pattern around captive feet, but no ghosts haunted the flaming woods where the lovers rode side by side. The autumn wealth was spent for their delight. For them the draped chestnuts burned to bronze, the proud beeches dropped reluctant tribute of gold and copper. The warm wind rose with a flourish and drove the fallen leaves in a madcap scurry to outrace the galloping pair. It sprang at the trembling poplars, tore out handfuls of their leaves and cast them abroad to whirl in the air like a swarm of frenzied butterflies. Every tree in the woods danced in ecstasy—that they might ride and laugh and count it all for added joy.

No shade from a prison fortress troubled the free forest where the lovers rode side by side.

INTERLUDE

DECEMBER, 1664

THE trial of Nicolas Fouquet shook all France. For weeks on end nothing else was talked of in Paris. Popular sympathy was all for the accused. The greatness of his former position, the tragic suddenness of his fall, his reputation for liberality, the unconscionable delay in bringing him to trial (he had languished in prison for three years before the Royal Commission appointed to try him was opened in the Capital), the animosity with which the King—and still more his present First Minister, Colbert—were credited, all told in his favour. The charges of incitement to civil war, speculation and mal-administration of the public finances meant little to the masses, moreover it was freely stated these indictments covered unpublished and more dramatic offences.

The prisoner had affronted the Queen-Mother; it was whispered that a paper exposing her personal relations with Mazarin had been found among the papers seized at Vaux and St. Mandé. According to another version he had plotted to seize the King's person, to place the Duke of Orléans on the throne. He had attempted to supplant his Sovereign in other and less treasonable ways—Mlle de la Vallière's name was mentioned, even that of Madame Henriette. There was no end to what the enterprising captive had designed had not the King stolen a march on him and laid him by the heels at Nantes.

But none of these intriguing rumours affected public opinion. To the masses the fallen Minister remained an injured man—a jovial gentleman who threw his money about, who had an easy hand for his servants and debtors; a contrast to his successor, dour, glum-faced Colbert, who might have increased employment, had reduced taxation, perhaps, but whose new rules and restrictions interfered with the liberty of everyone, rich and poor.

Where lay the advantage of a job in his much-talked-of factories—the Gobelins, the Savonnerie, those busy weaving-shops he had set up all over the country—if you weren't free to throw it up for one which suited you better? A job where the hours were fixed to the minute, and precious long

hours too ! A workman's life was hard enough without having a drop too much or a harmless little spell of idleness treated as a crime ! Merchants detested the reformer who kept a tight hand on profits by making it impossible to fill home markets with Dutch novelties bought dirt cheap and sold as dear as Frenchmen could be induced to buy. Aristocrats resented a miserable clerk pranking as Chief Minister, to whom one must now needs accord the title of Monseigneur—this cheese-parer who had the cunning foresight to demand the *Don gratuit* individually and thereby publish non-payment or small gift as personal disloyalty to the Crown—this upstart who had the insolence to meddle with the refinements indispensable to the élite—witness his outrageous duties on English horses and shoes, on Dutch cabinets and cordials, Italian fans, perruques, perfumes.

Imperturbable Jean-Baptiste, Minister of Taxation, Justice, Industry, Agriculture, Marine—that family man imprisoned in an office, his twelve-hour day stretched to fifteen and ever growing longer, that beneficent magician whose potent wand waving over chaotic France had halved taxation, had given work to thousands and made bread available and brought down its price in the year of cruel famine, the terrible '62—was the most unpopular man in France.

Abroad, in the first whispers circulating across Europe of the new glories of French taste and craftsmanship, those tapestries like paintings, those carpets like fields in bloom, that crystalline glassware, those silks and velvets, the rich lace which was the rage among the fashionables from Vienna to Madrid, M. Colbert's name might be invoked with admiration and respect. The whispers were to swell into a shout ; generations to come should proclaim France the Arbiter of fashion and elegance, but all this availed Jean-Baptiste nothing. In 1664 Frenchmen and still more Frenchwomen, regarded the genius of these miracles not only as a tyrannous innovator but as the villain who had plotted the ruin of his unsuspecting chief, a greater man, in order that he might filch his post.

Fouquet, who, in a dozen years, had never instituted a single measure for the relief or prosperity of his countrymen, was invested by them with the halo of a martyr.

Louis, responsible for Colbert's reforms and Fouquet's disgrace, lost no popularity over either. By his subjects at large the young King was adored. He satisfied national

pride and national ambition. This fine, serious-faced young man, who worked hard all day and played hard most of the night as befitted a good Frenchman, was exactly to their taste. He had made of a shabby Court something worth showing to foreigners. The King dining in public for all the world to see, and dining with first-rate appetite ; those gorgeous ballets wherein their Prince figured as well or better than the best ; those pageants and reviews to which anyone who could squeeze his way through the crowd was freely admitted to behold King Louis as imperial Cæsar, kilted, bare-legged, crowned with laurels, sitting his war horse like a throne ; those splendid spectacles were ruinous to the Nobility, but excellent for trade. Everything the King did he did royally ; if it was only a stroll in the Palace gardens with his cane and his dogs, he was every inch a King. A ruler after their own heart, enjoying life without losing dignity ; no wry-faced Louis XIII, no lousy Italian Cardinal ; a good Catholic, though, thank the Saints, nothing pious ; a gentleman who treated those haughty nobles as a master, but lifted his fine feathered hat to the humblest working woman. He could be trusted to look after France ; he'd put the dirty Spaniards in their place—the other side of the Pyrenees—before he was much older !

As for that chatter about a little Maid of Honour—Good luck to him ! Wasn't it common knowledge that his dull Spanish wife couldn't make herself understood in French even now ?

So Louis was acclaimed, while, round the Bastille, citizens gathered to pity his prisoner on his way to and from the Court ; while Colbert was abused in public and ostracized at the houses of Fouquet's noble sympathizers. "Petit Pouce" was the nickname bestowed on the stocky Jean-Baptiste by some of the more daring of the ex-Surintendant's feminine supporters.

Parisiennes were for Nicolas Fouquet. Ladies of quality, merchants' wives, dressmakers, servantmaids, and market women made the unfortunate the hero of the day. Mesdames Fouquet, mother and wife, pathetic figures in black with flowing veils, were saluted respectfully wherever they showed themselves. Even Mme du Plessis came in for a share of popular approval. She couldn't be a bad soul when Mme Fouquet was on such good terms with her. For Fouquet's wife and Fouquet's mistress joined forces in

their effort to secure the acquittal of the man they loved. The wife petitioned their Majesties, the Queen-Mother, Monsieur and Madame ; Mme du Plessis, more adroit, set to work on the more likely of the judges. Over her excellent dinners she entertained them with witty stories demonstrating Colbert's ambition to reduce all authority (including magisterial authority) except his own. She sold her plate and her jewels to bribe their hangers-on and their confidants. She instituted relations with the adverse party also. She discovered what Judge Foucault, Colbert's man, was up to, and her great triumph came when, during the progress of the trial, she unearthed and published the fact that certain documents discovered at Vaux which were favourable to the accused had been suppressed by order of the unspeakable "Petit Pouce."

That evening she attended the Comedy in her finest gown—it was a very fine one—and was cheered in her box. On leaving the theatre she came face to face with Mme Colbert and her daughters awaiting their coach. The triumphant du Plessis looked through these ladies and haughtily cut them dead. Her audience was thrilled and delighted.

Madame Fouquet Mère was afraid that her generous friend would go too far for her own safety, but La Plessis scorned prudence.

"Let the King arrest me if he dare !" she cried. "I'll have something to say to His Majesty if he attempts it. Something he'll not like to hear !"

Madame nodded her head with finality, but the Fouquet ladies, accustomed to lavish declarations from their whole-hearted ally, did not attach much importance to this one.

The Sessions opened in this atmosphere of excitement. Crowds thronged the precincts of the Palais de Justice and the Bastille ; windows overlooking the short route along which the prisoner must pass were let at extravagant rates to his friends and to the curious. Masked ladies occupied these vantage spots ready to wave a handkerchief or burst into tears at sight of the victim. Parisian society was on tiptoe, and Madame de Sévigné prepared her couriers and made ready to send daily news-letters to the unfortunate M. de Pomponne, exiled from Paris at this critical moment—polite disgrace for sympathy too openly expressed for an old-time friend and benefactor.

There were twenty-one judges, the decision would be

according to majority. The President of the Court, the old Chancellor Séguier, had been among the first to decry his former colleague. In opening the proceedings he displayed an undisguised hostility which by its venom did the accused more good than harm ; it spurred Magistrate D'Ormesson and the more honourable of the judges to make a stand for fair play. The prisoner withstood the President's attacks with dignity and courage. The law allowing him no Counsel he undertook his own defence. A master of words, with a logical mind and considerable wit, even his enemies admitted that he had never spoken better than when refuting the charges against him, exposing the prejudice of the evidence, denying the legality of an arbitrarily constructed Court. He declined to take the oath to an illegal tribunal, and protested his very presence in the Chamber as being under compulsion. In pleading for his life he dealt the old Séguier, former adherent of the Fronde, many a shrewd blow. He compared the past record of this unjust judge with his own loyalty "in those turbulent days when the King was a child."

"In all those times, Sir," cried Fouquet with noble indignation, "and even at peril of my life, I have never abandoned the person of our King, and in those days you, Sir, led the Council of his enemies and your Party opened the gates to the armies of those against him !" The Chancellor did not know where to look ; Colbert's men scowled, but Fouquet felt, as an orator will, the surge of his audience towards him and knew that his point had gone home.

M. Colbert, the King's servant, waiting in an ante-room of the Court as he waited every day, cap and bag in hand, little better dressed despite advanced fortunes, looked gloomy at the way things were going. He grumbled at Séguier's blundering tactics ; and instructed another of the Judges, his relative the Registrar Pussort, to show more moderation. He told them to leave trifles alone and stick to essentials. What did it matter whether folk doffed caps to Fouquet or not ? Let them bare their heads so long as they took off Fouquet's, he jested grimly. "Stick to your charges, sir," urged the Chief Minister, wagging a stubby forefinger at the obstinate old Chancellor who would have told Mazarin's Clerk to go to the devil a few years earlier, but must now submit meekly to be hectorred by this beggar on horseback.

But on his way home Jean-Baptiste Colbert, who never

took a holiday, thought that perhaps a day's break might cool the air of that heated Court. That night he suggested to the King that, out of deference to the Queen's illness, all the Courts should be closed for a day of prayer.

For while at the Palais de Justice men fought for Fouquet's life, in the Louvre Marie-Thérèse, poor soul, lay fighting for hers. It was thought timely to bring her the Last Sacraments of the Church, but the sufferer objected. To her husband who, throughout her illness, had shown a surprising solicitude, she murmured weakly in her broken French, "*Je veux bien Communier mais pas pour mourir,*" and he, kneeling by her, patient and persevering, alone was able to overcome her reluctance.

The following day, Mme Fouquet Mère despatched a trustworthy messenger to the Louvre. A few hours later a curious story ran round Paris. The noble-hearted Mother had given a sovereign remedy to the dying Queen of such efficacy that the royal patient had slept, was eased, and the next day was openly declared out of danger.

Everyone ran to the Louvre to cheer—everyone else ran to Fouquet's house to cheer there. The prisoner's family remained prudently invisible, but Louis was compelled to gratify his loyal subjects by an appearance on a balcony where enthusiastic cries of "*Vive le Roi, Vive Mme Fouquet, la Sainte,*" greeted him indiscriminately.

People began to say that the least a grateful Queen could do for Mme Fouquet would be to obtain the Royal clemency for her son. "But," wrote the captious Mme de Sévigné, "I, who hear a little of the tenderness that prevails in that quarter—*Je n'y crois rien !*" That clever letter-writer thought, as many another of the well informed, that the prisoner's mother would have done better to have approached Mlle de la Vallière, herself something of an invalid at that time ; but unfortunately the indisposition of the object of the King's tenderness was not one to lend itself to cure by poultice. "Time alone will heal *that* migraine and time is a commodity of which our poor M. Fouquet has so little to spare," scribbled the witty Marquise and her dig at Mademoiselle Louise, living secluded in the Palais Brion while awaiting the birth of her baby, made quite a hit in smart circles.

When the friendly Sévigné paid her next visit to Mme du Plessis (that lady's house was the headquarters of the pro-

Fouquet party) she expressed her surprise that, although all the ladies of the Royal Family had been approached, none had as yet appealed to His Majesty's mistress. Surely this latter, retiring as she might be, unknown quantity as she certainly was, must be an influence to be reckoned with. A girl of twenty who, without powerful backing or remarkable beauty and in the face of strenuous opposition from would-be rivals had contrived to hold the King's affections for more than three years, must surely possess great power over her lover. Was Mme du Plessis acquainted with the sentiments of Mlle de la Vallière towards our poor dear M. Fouquet?

Mme du Plessis was giving away nothing to the lady who spent her days writing to the country. "There's much in what you say, my dear," was the utmost she would concede. But she had not overlooked the little country girl who owed her début to the Surintendant. Like other great tacticians she was keeping a valuable weapon in reserve.

On the 10th December the judges commenced to deliver *their opinions*. The friendly D'Ormesson spoke first. His was a fair, reasoned speech. On the evidence it was impossible to acquit the accused of the grave charges brought against him, but he urged every extenuating circumstance; the disorders of the times, the considerable services of the prisoner, his undoubted loyalty in times when many, to-day in high places, had proved disloyal. He ventured to quote the bad example of the mighty dead. "Monseigneur the Cardinal took more, he gave back less." At the close of a five-hour speech he recorded his vote in favour of exile and sat down, his conscience discharged, his reputation increased, amidst discreet applause.

The applause echoed largely in Paris that Friday night. It was the turn of the Hôtel D'Ormesson to be besieged now. The embarrassed owner, conscious of Royal disapproval, had the discretion to avoid the demonstrators and shut himself up in a back room over the week-end.

The Surintendant's friends took heart, but with the new week came a change in the scene. The magistrate St. Hélène was first on Monday; he cast his vote for death. But his halting speech made small effect. He was followed by Registrar Pussort, and this kinsman of Colbert's was the brains of the hostile party. The Registrar adopted a high moral tone, he launched into a tirade against treason. It was the Unforgivable Sin.

On his dark canvas he painted the great historic traitors—from Judas down to Charles de Bourbon. Scarlet and perspiring he shouted that although Fouquet's crimes merited no less than rope and gallows, yet, in consideration of the exalted post he had filled, he would resign himself to vote for a gentleman's death—the axe.

The Court closing in this atmosphere of fury, the exhausted orator escaped, wiping his face, to the moderate congratulations of Colbert, who was moved to offer him the cordiality of warm stubby fingers.

The next day was even blacker; four judges followed their leader Pussort. Six now for death, one for banishment and fourteen still to vote.

The prisoner's mother passed all day on her knees in the Sainte Chapelle, his wife wept herself to pitiful exhaustion and Mme du Plessis, dry-eyed, unpraying, judged it time to use that last weapon in reserve.

She set out early in the morning. Her abounding vitality equalled the trials of her life. However evil the tidings of the night before she woke each morning to optimism. Her agonies were violent but short-lived; the urge for action mastered them; set her, an undaunted woman, to combat her friend's enemies anew. Alone, on foot, she embarked on her enterprise, dressed well but soberly in a black cloth gown and mantle, plainly cut but of excellent materials, a handsome black lace veil over her hood and a neat basket of green and red wickerwork over her arm. She appreciated the fine weather. A good omen that the sun sparkled in a clear blue sky. It made walking a pleasure, the thin, hard snow concealing the dirty footways.

She visited her dressmaker, the linen draper and a bookseller. With each of these she left behind her the impression that despite the news the ex-Surintendant's position could not be so desperate after all. Finally she made some purchases at a high-class grocer's. A tongue in aspic, a dainty jar of *paté-de-fois gras*, an oval wooden box of preserved ginger and a packet of be-ribboned marzipan took on the guise of a consolation for yesterday's distress, a defiance to injustice, a pledge of the victory she must gain that day.

These luxuries in her basket, she left the provision shop by a side door and, climbing into a public vehicle, trusted thus to have thrown any spies of the miserable "*Petit Pouce*" off the track. She had herself set down at the top of the

Rue Richelieu, judging it discreet to walk the few yards to her destination.

The Palais Brion was an unpretentious edifice of two storeys built on the west side of the Palais Royal grounds and overlooking them from the back. In the front it was secluded from the street by a row of lime trees, ugly now in their pruned nakedness, and a palissade of wrought iron with copper mouldings, obviously newly erected. Not much of a place, thought La Plessis contemptuously ; poor Nicolas would have given me one ten times finer if I'd wanted it.

An impressive figure in sky-blue and silver stood to attention at the trellised gate ; a second musketeer was stationed at the house door. The visitor remembered that this little house had been guarded since an attempt, made some months previously, to enter the apartments of the Royal favourite in the middle of the night. Rumour credited the jealous Comtesse de Soissons, the Olympe Mancini of the King's boyish preference, with being the instigator of this outrage.

"She's got a pack of enemies, I'll swear," thought Mme du Plessis, not without satisfaction. Fouquet's faithful friend could have little love for the woman who owed her extraordinary fortune to the Surintendant, but who had ignored her benefactor completely since the day of his fall.

Somewhat to her surprise, she was unchallenged by the guard. Her resolute double knock and the demand for Mlle de la Vallière were met by a lofty glance at the shopping basket and a correction, "*Madama* does not receive to-day."

"Then have the goodness to deliver this letter to your Mistress. I will await her reply."

With an air of supercilious respect and unfeigned grudging she was admitted to the hall of the house. The footman passed the letter to a fair-haired boy dressed like himself in pale grey velvet, and stationed himself stiffly against the wall ; his regard studiously avoided the stranger looking about her with bourgeoisie curiosity.

"Very cold to-day," remarked the unabashed one, instinctively combating the first repulse and, ignoring the mute bend of minimum assent, she added, "I should think another fall of snow before to-night."

The servant and his background affected her adversely. Too grand, too pretentious for such a small place. Decorations and furniture too large, florid. That'll be the Louvre

touch! opined La Plessis, one of the few genuine King-haters in France. The girl, as she remembered her, had shown a light, dainty taste when buying the outfit for her *début* at Court.

The page returned. Madame was prayed to ascend. More thick carpets, painted ceilings, mirrors and candelabra wherever it was possible to place them, ending in a large light room with three windows looking on to the bare trees of the Palais Royal gardens. It was furnished in the same heavy style lightened by a careless disorder at variance with its formality. The insubstantial fabric of a silk gauze shawl traced with silver lay like a cloud across a heavy carved chair. An ornate dressing-table, veneered with tortoiseshell and inlaid with silver, was littered with toilet appointments, a muddle of gold and silver pots and flasks. Some writing materials, a book, a guitar on top of them, lay scattered on the floor. In an arm-chair beside a blazing wood fire, sat a woman whose name was known throughout Europe and little of her beyond her name.

Mme du Plessis entering received the instant impression of an expectant, nervous face directed towards the door. She's changed, she thought. She remembered the pale gold curls, the bright, delicate complexion and large soft eyes. The girl's condition was obvious, but it was not that which made her appear different. The face had altered—it was thinner, older, less pretty perhaps, but more interesting by reason of a thoughtful, remote look which the fact that she was startled could not entirely bring back to earth. It occurred to Mme du Plessis that "poetic" was the word to describe Louise de la Vallière. Maybe it was the gown, she thought, estimating the wrapper of thin smoke-blue silk, the fronts bordered with narrow bands of ermine. Not modish, of course, but the transparent effect enhanced the elusive beauty of the wearer. Mme du Plessis remarked the absence of ornament, no clasps, no bracelets, only a plain ring on the left hand and a little pearl necklet half hidden by the collar of white fur.

The girl began softly, "You sent this note, Madame?" It was in her hand.

"It is from M. Fouquet."

Louise looked uncertain. "But this is not M. Fouquet's hand, surely?"

The visitor bowed before answering with an air of dryness.

"Madame is correct. It is not permitted to despatch letters from the Bastille. The pen is my own. The words are M. Fouquet's as I received them for you."

The hesitant face clouded. The visitor, invited to sit, took her place on a deep settee. As if disdaining the soft familiarities of its many cushions she sat erect, her black woollen skirts pleated strongly around her, the high-heeled Spanish leather shoes with their silver buckles placed with firm elegance on the rosy wreaths of the rich carpet. She folded back her veil with one competent movement and addressed her face to the girl reclining in the easy chair. A handsome, determined face it was ; the other, encountering it, drew the fronts of her fur-bordered wrap over her thin breast and seemed to shrink into the protection of her chair. Mme du Plessis observed the movement.

"No, Madame, it is not to be expected that our unfortunate friend would be suffered to write to you or to anyone who might be able to assist him. Poor M. Fouquet has been confined close this past three years ; a weary time to be cut off from all who love him ! "

Louise murmured ; a sound of commiseration.

"But he's not without friends. It would be against nature that a man who helped so many in his prosperity should want for friends now. So that you may understand, Madame, how I come to have this message, I will tell you that some of us have found a means of penetrating the walls of the Bastille. I'll say no more, and I say as much in all confidence."

The firm voice lifted as though in challenge.

The girl said nothing. The hesitation of her face had resolved into a more definite expression—reluctance.

"It's not a long message is it, Madame ? It is difficult to say much. Safer to be brief. I know it by heart. I've said it to myself so often. 'I don't blame Mlle de la Vallière. I'm sure she knew nothing of the harm she did. When she knows the truth she'll be the first to help me.' That's my errand here, Madame, to make sure you know the truth."

Her full brown eyes, fixed on the other's downcast face, waited until it lifted.

"I don't understand. How can he say I did him harm ? When did I ever harm him ? "

Mme du Plessis waiting to decide on her attitude saw

possibilities in this reply, which she considered a weak evasion.

She launched herself into warm volubility. "Perfectly, Madame, perfectly. Your words explain everything. Not that it needed to be explained to me. How could you have intended to injure him if you are not even aware of what is in question? And if you are not aware now, how could you have known then—three years ago—when you gave him that unfortunate advice? I've said as much many a time, when I've heard folk say you knew what you were doing and that was why you wouldn't lift a finger to help him. Why, there's hardly a woman in France would have done a thing like that, let alone a friend like you, Mlle de la Vallière, whom he treated like a daughter as you might say. I haven't the honour of much acquaintance, Madame"—she pointed the compliment with another little bow—"but one hears of your kindness on every hand." With a small sideways shake of the head she concluded with emphasis and as if conveying an assurance, "Certainly I have never believed it, whilst as for poor M. Fouquet, you have but to read his words to perceive his trust in you."

While she spoke the young face opposite had grown increasingly troubled.

"I fear I do not understand."

"Why, the Office, Madame! The Office you counselled him to resign! Naturally you did not appreciate the risk he ran; he could never have been arrested—brought to this trial—if he had remained in Office. That privilege of the Procureur-Général was his safeguard."

"Oh dear!"

The inadequacy of the interjection, uttered in tones little above a whisper, irritated the woman whose nature was to do and dare. Why, this creature was hopeless! Could it be possible that such a one should have it in her power to save or not to save? Men were strange creatures, she told herself. She would not have trusted Louise de la Vallière to bath a babe! Yet Nicolas had thought the world of her, and had she not managed to entrap the King, keep him for herself for three years in competition with the cleverest beauties of the Court? She must be deeper than she seemed. Indeed, Mme du Plessis trusted so—there was some hope in an adversary of mettle.

She began again:

"Ycs, Madame. Nicolas Fouquet would have been a free man to-day if he had stayed Procureur-Général. I grieve to distress you—I was loth to intrude—I delayed as long as I might. But now that the trial is going so badly for him I dare wait no longer. It's a question of his *life* to-day, Madame."

The girl was undisguisedly shocked. Her face whitened, the hand which had been fingering the pearls at her throat moved suddenly to her lap and clasped its fellow. Her voice held consternation.

"Oh, I didn't know that! I haven't heard much—I don't go much abroad . . ." She faltered over the excuse.

Mme du Plessis opposed the agitated face with the implacable expression of her own. No evasion, no retreat behind wraps and delicacy would be permitted while she had a tongue in her head.

"Madame, all Paris is up in arms against this cruel injustice. I will tell you!"

In a rapid, indignant voice, she sketched her picture. In the centre the figure of the generous, unsuspecting man, "as known to you, Madame"; in the background, jealous, unscrupulous rivals bent on his downfall. She dilated on their underhand methods; his one defence stolen from him by deceit; his arrest far from home and friends; snatched from a sick-bed, flung into prison shivering with fever, while his houses were broken open, his papers rifled, those which could have cleared him abstracted. As for that document they called an Incitement to Civil War, Mme du Plessis would not put it beyond some of his enemies to commit forgery pure and simple. With an air of generous wrath she flung down names—Le Tellier, who had bought the Office of Procureur-Général; the old-time traitor Séguier, now biting the hand which had fed him; Colbert's jackal Pussort, and Colbert himself. Only one name was unspoken, the name she meant to force from Louise de la Vallière.

"So they brought him to trial, Madame, and what a trial! I ask you! For three years they have piled up their false evidence while he lay bound hand and foot, forbidden to see so much as a friend, unable to stir in his own defence. It should have melted hearts of stone, but then the judges are Colbert's men and have no hearts. Yesterday night, Madame, only M. d'Ormesson, that just and noble man,

had voted for Exile. Seven were for Death ! ” She caught her breath in a sob.

The sound was echoed in the girl’s shudder. Horror, incredulity and fear were expressed in the movement with which she clasped her arms over her bosom.

“ But it is the King ! He must have had just cause ! ”

Triumphant, Mme du Plessis answered soothingly, “ The King is young ; he has been misled.”

She watched the other’s face quieten, the agitation of the eyes subside to sadness.

“ Madame, if you prefer we will not accuse anyone. We will shut our eyes. We will only see our friend’s extremity.”

And now, overcome by reality, her thoughts sprang from the conflict, the adversary ; she envisaged a sight not uncommon in Paris but never seen by her. The scaffold and the block ! . . . The black-masked executioner leaning on his axe . . . Desperate to save, she dropped all fashions and said with complete sincerity, “ Yes, the King ! Our only hope is in the King ! ”

She saw the girl flinch. She followed up with another blow.

“ It is your kind intercession with His Majesty I come to beg—from my heart.”

She did not lean back but something softer, something rounded off and complete was expressed in the slight relaxation of the fingers which found and stroked the handle of the green and red basket as if communicating a satisfaction to the one sympathetic object in that alien room. She studied the effect of her appeal. The girl appeared lost in thought. She sat motionless, her eyes downcast, the lashes a shadow on the clear pale cheek, her arms crossed as a rampart before her breast. Determined to compel her, the visitor gazed on. The flames of the fire streamed upwards as if carrying life ; a log split ; at once the girl sighed and, unmoving, without a glance at the woman hanging on her words, said slowly :

“ I—ask the King—for M. Fouquet ? ”

“ Yes.”

Spoken gently, almost tenderly, the word had an imperative effect. Louise de la Vallière turned to the speaker, her hands hurried to the neck of her ermine-bordered wrap, opening it as if for coolness.

"Why not go to him yourself? Tell him all you have told me, ask him yourself?"

Her tone was a supplication. Mme du Plessis marked this welcome reversal of rôles. She drew herself up.

"I, Madame? How may I petition the King for M. Fouquet? By what title? The King would not receive me, naturally. I have no standing where my dear friend is concerned. None."

The beseeching face coloured. "Pardon, Madame, but could not his wife——?"

"Is it possible! You do not know that the King has rejected all Madame Fouquet's petitions?"

As if in imitation of her visitor, Louise also sat upright. For the first time there was energy in her voice.

"There must be a reason. The King would not act thus without cause. I have heard it said that M. Fouquet has been gravely to blame."

Mme du Plessis moved energetically. She threw out both black-sleeved arms as if tossing aside so much rubbish.

"Blame! He has been to blame? You have been told that, Madame—and by whom? Ask yourself, Madame. And, I pray you, who is blameless? Who are we, Madame, to sit in judgment? I make no doubt you have been told he robbed the King. Easily said, and which of them has not? And has not he been robbed, M. Fouquet? Where is now the one and a half millions he was paid for that unhappy office? Where is it, I ask you? You do not know perhaps, but I do! It is in the Royal Treasury, Madame; his free gift to the King. *One and a half millions!* Given barely a month before he was commanded to Nantes to be thrown into prison. His money *and* his life! God bear me witness. It's *too* much!"

The bright, full eyes flashed round the room as if accusing its luxury.

"Please don't talk like that. I know the King would keep nothing that was not justly his."

The second flicker of spirit seemed to exhaust her. She lay back on her side, her cheek against the cushions, one hand stretched slackly on the chair-side, as if too fatigued for further effort.

Mme du Plessis spoke soothingly. "You must pardon me, Madame; I am distracted. I say more than I would, but it is a fact that M. Fouquet invested this great sum in

the Public Funds to assist the King. Is that the action of a traitor? But it doesn't matter, money doesn't matter any longer. It's his life. You may be wondering why *I* have come to you, and not his wife. It's because she has her children and his old Mother to consider. She must be prudent for their sake. But he comes first to me! He was my lover. All the world knew it, and I was proud of it. I *am* proud of it! There's nothing I wouldn't do for him. Go to the King? I'd kiss his feet; I'd kiss the feet of the meanest beggar in the streets!" she ended proudly and vehemently. "That's my love. Some folk call it sin. Let them! There are sins and sins, and the blackest of all to my mind is to abandon a friend in distress."

Louise looked away from her. "I can't," she muttered miserably. "Don't ask me. I can't do it. Don't ask me again."

The other rose. "I set out with high hopes this morning."

Standing where she had risen, the ample skirts close pleated around her, hands clasped against the firm corsage, she reproached the humiliated woman defending herself by her fear alone against the assault of one dauntless purpose.

"It wouldn't cost you anything, just to speak. The worst that could befall would be if he refused you. And is he like to?" Her eyes, passing over the huddled figure, said plainly—you being as you are. "I can't believe the King would deny you anything your heart was set on."

At last she had gained some satisfaction. The prudish little wretch, too poor to respond to another's sufferings, too mean for gratitude, was actually blushing scarlet, ashamed of her own child! But she had not finished with her. She sat down again.

"Yes, I set out with high hopes. I said, 'Mlle de la Vallière will surely help him when she knows the truth. She'll not be one to forget past benefits'—besides no woman with a heart could know she had brought a good friend to ruin and not be touched. I said to myself—'I've been so miserable this long while, but I believe the worst is over. I'll buy a few little luxuries, something to hearten us'—we fare plainly these days—we've had to cut down our costs, we've given our all to defend our friend—but I promised myself—when I go back maybe I'll have good news for them all, Mme Fouquet and the kind old lady, his Mother, sitting there bravely day after day, and his poor children. I'll be

beside myself with joy to tell them Mlle de la Vallière has promised to intercede with the King—you'll see, she'll save him yet ! And we'll celebrate with a little supper and drink her good health."

Her voice broke, and yielding to her emotion, to the fatigue of her exertion, she cried, "I couldn't abide to see them now !"

Her hands went to the rush basket. The girl watched, hypnotized, the extraction of a small straw-coloured jar, saw it placed carefully on the damask cushions, then an oval wooden box, another jar and a little silver packet tied with pretty satin ribbons. The plump, ringed hands settled them safely with the consideration of a housewife who knows what is due to good provisions.

"You'll allow me to leave them here, Mademoiselle. I never want to see such things again."

She rose once more, the pleated skirts swung as she moved to the door ; halfway she turned and facing Louise, the pleats all falling into place, said in a rough, hurried whisper :

"Maybe when your time comes—I wish you well through it, of course, I don't wish anyone sorrow, but one never knows—maybe you'd be glad to think you'd saved a poor life, that his wife was praying for you and his innocent children. I say nothing of myself. I've no right, I'm nobody—nothing at all !"

She curtsied, a completely dignified figure.

Louise did not rise. She sat there overwhelmed and deeply affected. She put out her hand, not in farewell, in detaining entreaty.

"I'll do it. I'll do what I can. It's not that I don't care, but I'm not brave like you. It comes hard to me to ask for things," she ended in confused apology.

INTERLUDE—(continued)

MME DU PLESSIS had erred in ascribing Louise's silence to insensibility. Words had failed the girl brought face to face with a portentous revelation, but from the moment of receiving Fouquet's message she had been intensely alive to every one of its implications. As the visitor unfolded her tale, horrified compassion for the unfortunate had striven

against reluctance to be drawn again into his affairs. Sitting silently, in consternation, her thoughts had run ahead of the visitor's full-charged words. She had pictured with distressing clarity the sufferings of her one-time benefactor, the treachery and harshness of which he was the victim.

While the indignant voice denounced the perfidy of others, she was recalling every circumstance of her own unwitting part in the tragedy unrolled before her shocked imagination. Sitting by her fire, tongue-tied, she was back on the road from Chaillot; the stationary coach, the summer rain pattering on its roof, herself leaning wearily, thankfully, against Louis. She heard his voice, she remembered it as careful—"It would be more convenient if he resigned. Tell him—he will understand." She had gone to Fouquet's house the next day expressly to tell him. He had appeared pleased, relieved, to understand perfectly. He had thanked her kindly, again reminded her to count on him for any service for herself or her brother, and they had parted on the friendliest terms. She had never seen him again. The King's letter from Nantes informing her of the arrest had come as a grief and a shock. Louis, on his return, had at first seemed optimistic as to the outcome of the matter, but as time passed her inquiries elicited that things looked grave, incriminating papers had been discovered; he could no longer discuss the affair, it must be left to the trial. But the trial had been long in coming, so long that she had forgotten it for months together.

The unexpected and tragic reminder brought other emotions than horror, pity, undefined apprehension and a reluctance to intervene. Far from imperceptivity, her vision had been clearer than that of her petitioner. The woman of ripe experience versed in men and their motives had scorned in the shrinking figure an exhibition of cowardice and ingratitude; the girl who at twenty possessed little more real knowledge of the world than at seventeen, was aware at once of an admirable example. The spectacle of a love whose generosity and proud frankness knew no shame reproached her for reasons deeper than any neglect towards a half-forgotten friend.

She also was a lover, but by comparison inglorious. She also loved with all her heart, but not according to her heart's desire. She would have chosen to have loved validly, openly, before the world. Instead, circumstances antagonistic to

her character obliged incessant warfare with it. Sensitive, the publicity of her position made her a coward. Naturally frank, she was compelled to the subterfuge inherent in a false position. She knew no happiness apart from her lover and in the company of others little ease with him. Only when they could be alone was she herself. At Court where she must spend her days or be largely parted from him, refusing to face reality she acted an unconvincing part. Not that of the Royal Mistress, triumphant, enviable, but that of a little Maid of Honour, unremarkable among her peers.

Such was her armour against a Fate too strong for her. The defence was poor ; it left her vulnerable to every wound. The obsequiousness of the men, the jealousy of the women, their intrigues, the isolation inseparable from her position, threw her back on herself, narrowed and falsified her outlook. There could be few natural relationships for her nowadays. Louise de la Vallière, pretty, gay, youngest of the Maids of Honour, had possessed her girl friends, her share of admirers. The courtiers approached the King's mistress warily. Their deferential attentions were impersonal : a vicarious homage to the Sovereign, a propitiation of that source of favour—the Queen of the left hand. The ladies, according to type, fawned on her, spied on her, held indignation meetings or let her virtuously alone. In the early days of their liaison, soon after her return from Chaillet, she had believed herself to possess one friend at the Palais Royal. In her loneliness she had given some confidence to Mlle de Montalais, who, all interest and sympathy, had lost no time in marketing a valuable secret. She had approached the Comtesse de Soissons, that unscrupulous Mazarin, as envious to-day of the disinterested La Vallière, as ever yesterday of her ambitious young sister. The pair of conspirators had concocted an anonymous letter and found someone to put it into bad Spanish : a warning to the still incredibly unsuspecting Marie-Thérèse. Louis, ever on the watch, had intercepted the letter in the nick of time. The affair was abortive, but from the welter of Palace intrigue one fact emerged clearly : the treachery of her friend. Louis had charged her never to speak to either woman again, and in a matter of days the enterprising Montalais had vanished into the seclusion of a distant Convent ; it was six months before the more dangerous accomplice, Olympe de Soissons, dared show her face in Paris.

muffs—merrymakers en route for an afternoon on the ice. Recalling how she had loved to skate at Blois, sighing at thought of the fun of four years ago, she drew back till they should have passed. No sooner had she leant out again than from below a voice called peremptorily :

"In Heaven's name, shut that window ! Do you want to catch your death ? "

She disappeared more quickly than previously, but not before she saw the figures of the distant group turn round. She imagined the sneer : " Hark at His Majesty coddling his love bird ! " How could Louis be so thoughtless ? He would never have drawn attention to her like that a year ago, she thought resentfully.

A moment later she heard him on the staircase ; he came in quickly, an out-of-doors figure in a handsome dark red riding-suit bordered with fur, his hair tied back with a broad crimson ribbon, a high colour in his face : a picture of health and energy.

" Have you taken leave of your senses ? " he greeted her reproachfully, " hanging out of the window with nothing round your shoulders ! Do you know this is the coldest day this winter ? "

" Is it ? " she spoke indifferently. " I thought it was never too cold for you. This room is oppressive. "

" It certainly is too hot, much too hot, but that's no reason to run to the other extreme. " He kissed her affectionately on both cheeks and added briskly, " Why not dress yourself, wrap up warmly and take the air ? There's a good hour of daylight yet, a walk would do you good. I'll take you to see the skating ; you'd enjoy it. "

" Oh no, it's too late. I'm tired. "

Exhibit herself with him in her condition ! Again she marvelled at the obtuseness which could make such a suggestion and again Mme du Plessis's shadow mocked her.

" As you please, my dear. But you should take more exercise. Ask Dr. Boucher—he's of my opinion, I know. Hello ? " He addressed the walls, for Louise had slipped out, closing the door of the adjoining room. To make herself tidy, thought the deluded man ; it was beyond his imagination to divine that his bracing conversation grated on her.

Something else needed tidying. He surveyed the boudoir with good-humoured resignation. What a muddle—quaint child ! If she'd a dozen rooms and fifty servants it would

be the same. He picked up the books and set them on the table in a neat pile, then looked round for a seat. Every chair was occupied by something or other : he selected the couch as the least encumbered.

Louise returning in a fresh *négligée* of pale pink satin, her hair combed into curls and tied with a bandeau of tiny rose-coloured feathers, was just in time to catch him pushing an assortment of small objects to the further end of the settee with one careless sweep of his arm.

This treatment of Mme du Plessis's pathetic consolations jarred. She bent over the little collection, arranging it gently and as far from him as the length of the couch allowed. Rising, she found his eyes fixed on her.

"That's a charming colour. Where did you buy that, sweetheart?"

She was less pleased than usual to be told it suited her to perfection. Mme Colbert had got it for her—ages ago. Shrugging her shoulders she objected that she looked a sight in everything.

"You look mighty pretty, Louise."

It pleased him to consider that child-bearing had not detracted from her beauty. She had the right figure for it, tall and slender, and she knew how to dress herself. He remembered the appalling sight presented by the pregnant Marie-Thérèse. Poor solid little Spaniard with her clumsy shawls and brocades, her fads and ailments, her horrible lack of self-control in labour. She had screamed for hours, screamed herself hoarse, as her husband, retained in the next room by his sense of duty even more than by the insistence of royal etiquette, had good reason to remember. "I don't want to have a child. I want to die!" Over and over again his ears had been assailed by that rasping pitiful voice. Poor little wretch, dividing her jealous heart between him and their only child. She was a loving mother if injudicious. Louis, whose capacity for managing everything included a system for the education of the Dauphin from his cradle, was hard put to it to restrain his wife from ruining the digestion of the three-year-old boy with unsuitable delicacies, but he appreciated her maternal affection. Louise had been neither sick nor fanciful, she had endured her ordeal with courage, and alone; he had been with her when the pains began, but had been called from her side long before the birth. She had not complained. "Did

you think I wanted you to see me suffer ? ” she had whispered when he had been admitted to her lying in that bed in the next room, face flushed, eyes bright, the four-hours’ infant already smuggled out of the house in Dr. Boucher’s arms and under Colbert’s imperturbable supervision. His orders, but he hated to think of it, and of Louise’s incomprehensible indifference.

Poor little dead-and-gone baby ! Poor Louise ! Poor Marie-Thérèse ! But he did not really waste pity on either wife or mistress ; he had given his throne to one, his heart to the other, the greatest gifts he had to give.

Now, hearing Louise asperse her beauty, his first thought was that she must be unwell. Looking more attentively at her he decided she was merely out of spirits and set himself to hearten her, after his own fashion. He had something amusing to recount. Did she remember that little madrigal he had composed the other day—the one she had thought so feeble ? Well, this morning he had had the idea to show it to old de Grammont, without disclosing its authorship to the old fellow. “ ‘ What do you think of it, M. le Maréchal ? Poor stuff, isn’t it ? I’m always having this fatuous rubbish inflicted on me.’ ‘ Sire, your judgment is perfect. Fatuous ! The very word for it ! ’ It was the most ridiculous rubbish he had ever read. Myself, Louise, with perfect gravity : ‘ Delighted, my dear Maréchal, with your frankness. I wrote it myself ! ’ I thought the poor old man was going to have a fit, his eyes were popping out of his head ! His excuses were pitiable—he’d read it hastily, his sight was failing, if he could read it again ! ”

He laughed like a boy at his cruel little practical joke. Then suddenly stopped. “ My best story wasted. I’m flattered by your attention, Louise. Come back to earth. What’s the trouble ? ” He patted the cushions by his side. “ Sit down and tell me all about it.”

She did not move from the hearth where she stood in profile to him, one satin-shod foot resting on the fender. The firelight flushed her pale pink draperies to rose, and sparkled in the diamonds worn in a band on the bare arm lying slackly against her skirts. She appeared to be considering.

“ Mme du Plessis called on me to-day.”

“ Are you speaking of the nurse ? ” Preparing to listen, he settled himself comfortably against the cushions.

"The nurse's name is Fleury."

"My dear child—I have not forgotten her name, my memory for names is excellent. Yours, if I may say it, is at times unreliable. It occurred to me that you might be referring to the nurse. I have known you mistake names," he ended with cheerful superiority.

She turned from the fireplace.

"Mme du Plessis came on behalf of M. Fouquet."

"That woman!" His face went blank. "An unwarrantable proceeding. An insolence, one might say."

"No," she spoke quickly, "she was not insolent. She is a brave, noble woman and greatly distressed."

"She certainly possesses courage—to come here."

"She came to ask me to help her."

"Obviously. And you?" He smiled at her. She smiled back.

"I told her I would do my best. Is it possible for you to pardon M. Fouquet?"

He continued to smile, leaning back at his ease on the settee.

"Is it possible?" she repeated.

"Naturally it is possible." A grave, cautious tone with which she was familiar.

"Then I hope you will consider it."

The smile came back as a teasing expression. "My dear Louise, is that your best effort? That's not the way to set about a petition. I know the procedure by heart: I receive them every day of my life. You commence by stating your high opinion of the person you desire to influence, you continue by stressing your own complete disinterestedness, you protest your loyalty, your attachment, your . . ."

She made a dash at him and slapped her hand over his mouth. "Be quiet. It's not a laughing matter."

Laughing and twisting his head, he pulled her fingers away, holding them fast.

"Very well, I beg your pardon. I won't laugh again. It sounded so droll, you and your petition, but as you say it's not a matter for laughing; it's also quite outside your province—and mine for that matter."

"How can it be outside yours?"

He seemed quite serious. "It's a matter for the Court. It would be wrong for me to intervene in any decision they may arrive at."

She sighed. "I wish I understood it. I wish you'd explain the whole affair to me."

He relinquished her hand. "Surely your visitor has done so already?"

"She told me a long story—but I cannot believe all she told me."

He put his arm round her; they sat back together.

"I can imagine what she told you, but I flatter myself, my darling, that neither this Mme du Plessis nor anyone else could convince you that I am the persecutor of this man now standing his trial. Naturally, she and his friends wish to believe him innocent. It's a wretched business, but I don't need to tell you I would not have ordered his prosecution without just cause."

Louis's version of the celebrated case now absorbing the interest of half Europe, differed from that of Mme du Plessis. It was restrained, brief and eminently sensible. He contented himself with a bare enumeration of the charges, insisted on the fairness of the trial, the impartiality of the judges, the consideration shown to the prisoner. In conclusion he demonstrated how impossible it would be for the King's Justice to be set aside by an arbitrary pardon. In answer to her question he declined to express an opinion as to Fouquet's guilt. It would be unfair—pending the verdict. To a further question he explained the alternative sentences for such crimes, if proved. Banishment, temporary or permanent, imprisonment, for a term or for life, death—"with or without confiscation of goods," concluded Louis, as if by way of afterthought.

She listened attentively, her enthusiasm somewhat dashed, her pity unaltered, that faint unease at the bottom of her heart relieved; for this impartial statement convinced her, if she needed to be convinced, that if there were one man in France who could be relied upon for justice it was her Louis. It was plain that he viewed the matter seriously; she recalled that he had always seemed to mistrust Fouquet, but his sense of fairness would not permit him to prejudge a man on trial, even to her.

Twilight was deepening in the room, the fire had died down, the three long oblongs of the windows gleamed smoke-grey against the dark frame of the walls; she could no longer see his face distinctly as she turned to him and said:

"Thank you, beloved. I don't see after what you have

said that I could ask for his pardon. I can only hope that he will be proved innocent, but it's rather sad, the first favour I ever wanted to ask you . . ."

He answered softly, "That's only too true, and most unkind it is."

"You've given me everything I possess."

"And nothing you value."

She rubbed her cheek against his arm. "Who says so? All I value is here beside me, and all I most admire."

Although he told her affectionately that he was undeserving of her praise, it was merely a pleasant exaggeration. He valued her good opinion: in a world of ever-increasing adulation he had kept his head in the main; he could still discern flattery and lip-service. In this girl he knew himself possessed of perhaps the only creature who would not change if by an enchanter's spell his throne should crumble. But already he regarded her devotion not only as his due but his achievement. Three years of extraordinary success as ruler, as statesman, as reformer, had been more potent than the incense burnt before him. Louise de la Vallière was unique, but she was his discovery as well as his reward, and despite her religious scruples and unflattering modesty, a desirable possession indeed. Few men, above all few Princes, could boast of a completely disinterested lover.

He rose. "Shall we have lights?"

From the darkness of the sofa her voice, slow, reflective, arrested his hand on the bell.

"There's one thing more I don't understand. It's about the Office M. Fouquet resigned—the Procureur-Général. But wait till they've brought the candles—it's almost dark."

He sat down again, but not so near her. "It's quite pleasant sitting in the fire-light. What is it you don't understand?"

"Mme du Plessis said it was the most disastrous thing he could have done—to resign the Office. She said he would never have done so except for me. It distressed me to hear her say that."

"What did she mean—except for you?"

The question was very calmly put. He felt her turn towards him; she was seeking his face in that dim light. He waited.

"Why I asked you about it long ago. Don't you remember? It was in the carriage on the way back from Chaillot."

As one reflecting, he replied, "Yes, I think I remember something about it, but what is the connection?"

"I took him your message—that you preferred him to resign. He seemed pleased. Louis, tell me, is it true that if he had remained in Office he could not have been brought to trial?"

He gave a short laugh. "Something of an exaggeration there. It would have presented difficulties, of course: the Procureur-Général enjoys certain privileges."

"I wish I'd known." She spoke with regret. "Did you?"

He repeated with an accent of patient impatience, "Did I know? Naturally. I have always known such things, but it had no bearing on the case at that time; there was no question of mistrusting M. Fouquet. He had my confidence as Minister. You may remember I always objected to his *private* life, but that was not my affair. His resignation suited me because then, as now, it was against my policy to have my Ministers holding office in the Paris Parlement." His voice lost the impatient inflection. "I appreciate that the decision has turned out to be unfortunate from his point of view."

She sighed. Again he received the impression that she was seeking to touch him. . . . He felt for her hand and pressed it. "Don't take it to heart: you are not to blame in the slightest. It is a monstrous suggestion. It annoys me more than I can say that it should have been made to you. As far as my recollection goes the man plagued you to concern yourself with his affairs: it displeased me at the time."

For the first time she laughed. "Displeased? Why, you were *furious*!"

He released her hand and stood up, stretching himself.

"Was I? Well, we were younger then and didn't understand each other as well as we do nowadays. It would take more than a dozen Fouquets to come between us now, wouldn't it? We'll drop this disagreeable subject—it must be distressing for you, and I hate you to be upset. There's nothing either of us can do in any case; as I said before, the decision rests with the judges. We shall know it in a day or two I am told."

He became active and cheerful; rang for candles; they would sup together by the fire. To-morrow and probably

the next day he would be up to the eyes in affairs and might not be able to see her at all.

When the lights came he had left the room.

In the dressing-room he used on his visits he sent for the major-domo and spoke sharply concerning the lady who had been permitted to trouble Madame. He spoke *so* sharply that the functionary, in self-defence, ventured to suggest the honour of explicit directions for the future.

M. le Ministre and Madame Colbert ; M. le Marquis de la Vallière and Madame la Marquise. Madame did not wish to receive other persons for the next day or so.

The man repeated with great deference the names of the élite privileged to enter the sanctuary of the Palais Brion.

M. Colbert, the highly favoured, head of half a dozen Ministries, who fed a nation and taxed it, who built a navy from a handful of rotten hulks, that nursing-father of the King's realm and the King's bastards, presented himself at the front door of the Palais Brion an hour or so later. In accordance with instructions he was admitted without question. His business being stated as of great urgency he was escorted upstairs straightway. The discreet manservant, who took in everything with his eyes and gave away nothing with his tongue, thought that the visitor did not seem quite himself. If such an emotion had not seemed unnatural in a gentleman, one would have said agitated ; but then M. Colbert could scarcely be called a gentleman. At any rate, he hurried up the staircase at a speed unwise in a short, stout man already out of breath. Scarcely did he allow the footman time for due and proper announcement.

The man free to come and go in the Palais Brion entered unceremoniously. The commonplace figure in the habitual drab, unfashionable clothes, a wisp of linen at his neck, hat and bag crushed under his arm, looked incongruous in that fine apartment, festive now with candles and flowers. A strange visitor for the young couple by the fireside, she in her delicate pink, her ermine-bordered wrap loose over it, he magnificent in rich dull purple with plenty of fine lace.

He was reading poetry to her, sitting on the ground at the side of the couch on which she reclined, when M. Colbert arrived so inopportunistly. The visitor was scarcely to blame : like the major-domo he also had received his instructions. The verdict, when given was to be brought immediately to

his Master. Not his fault if the famous trial had ended with unforeseen and dramatic suddenness scarcely an hour ago. Everyone had counted upon its dragging on for at least a couple more days. Not his fault if the news were so bad that he hardly dared bring it; not his responsibility if his Sovereign was not to be found at the Louvre, where by rights he should have been; and certainly no blame could be attributed to him if among the wealth of confidences concerning Fouquet locked up in that incorruptible breast Louis had omitted to include one most pertinent—the rôle which Mlle de la Vallière had played in the drama of the late Surintendant's downfall.

No, if M. Jean-Baptiste Colbert merited censure for anything at all, it was for a mere breach of good manners. Even the most urgent business, even the most confidential servant, should wait the formality of the Master's permission. Louis's Chief Minister of State, still something of a novice in drawing-room arts, did not give his King much warning. Excited and breathless, not a little apprehensive, he brought out his bad news, muttered the word "exile" and stood there doing his best not to pant.

A little cry, an oath, rang out simultaneously. Then the conscientious messenger received the reproof he deserved.

"Why have you come here, sir? This is not the place for discussing such affairs."

M. Colbert had worked in his Master's company daily for the past three years. He should have known him by now; he certainly thought he did; the darkly red face, the cold eyes, a certain twitching beneath them as if the hooked nose descended over the full haughty mouth, these were familiar signs of Louis's displeasure. But the voice was controlled, not more peremptory than usual.

"I will hear what you have to say later."

The King turned to his companion, risen also and glancing from one man to the other in obvious perplexity. He addressed her in the formal style he used when in company. "I regret I must leave you, Madame; you will excuse me."

M. Colbert, beginning to recover himself, noticed that the young lady seemed bewildered.

"Oh, but you'll tell me about it first! I'm so anxious to hear. Exile! That's good news, isn't it? What a relief! For one moment I feared—M. Colbert looked upset—I thought it must be death. Oh, I *am* thankful!"

"Thankful!"

Her eyes blinked; she put her hand up to the base of her throat.

M. Colbert thought Mademoiselle looked as if she had had a turn. He blamed himself; one ought to be careful not to startle a woman so near her time.

Jean-Baptiste, once so disapproving of a young Maid of Honour, had come to revise his opinion of the lady of the Palais Brion. One could not but admit she had her good points; was never bold or interfering or extravagant. In his fashion he approved of his King's inexpensive mistress.

Now, he felt a fatherly impulse to soothe her, to bid her sit down, to give her a glass of wine, but of course it was not his place to do so in the King's presence. Strange that His Majesty, usually fussing over Mademoiselle if her little finger ached, should notice nothing. He had actually opened the window—letting in all that bitter cold. The poor young thing was shivering now and no wonder. Something out of the winter night besides cold was invading that warm, bright room, something M. Colbert took at first to be the noise of a lot of rowdy workmen making their way up the Rue Richelieu. Then he recognized it for cheering. Fouquet's friends, the mischievous crew, had not lost much time!

The King closed the window, replacing the curtains with precision.

"I will give you an order for the President. I wish you to take it yourself—forthwith."

He crossed the room deliberately to seat himself before an elegant little writing desk—a show piece in pale wood.

Colbert watched uneasily, his caution mistrusting such haste. This was a grave matter calling for consideration. He had several things to say for and against the action he divined his young Master was about to take. After the part he had played in the affaire Fouquet, this disregard of his opinion was hurtful as well as disconcerting. Perforce holding his peace, he looked with unconscious appeal at Mlle de la Vallière.

"Where's the sealing wax? Mislaid, I suppose."

Jean-Baptiste was surprised. Never before had he heard the King address the young lady disagreeably. He disapproved. No man of feeling, let alone a gentleman, upsets a woman at such times.

Poor Mlle Louise took it in the meekest fashion. She just went over to her desk and stood there, a little behind the writer, watching him.

As the King rose, letter in hand, Colbert noticed how suddenly she stood back.

"Don't send it, don't!"

He caught the undertone. Sensible girl. Just what he wanted to say himself. Encouraged by this support, he advanced a step.

"If I might advise Your Majesty——" Braving the haughty stare he went on doggedly: "If your Majesty proposes to override the sentence I would suggest that it might be wiser to reflect."

"I have not requested your advice. Here are my instructions."

M. Colbert had a thick skin; he was not over sensitive to rebuke as such, moreover he was becoming anxious for the fate of the enterprise which had occupied three years of his patient effort. This unexpectedly lenient verdict was a setback but, with a little consideration, it could probably be repaired. Mistrust of what he did not understand spurred him to make another attempt. He moved forward a step, the troubled persistent face questioned the face concealing rage behind a mask of frigid composure.

"Seeing it's got abroad already—that'll be M. Fouquet's friends—though how they've heard so soon is beyond me—I left instructions that nothing was to be published till I'd seen Your Majesty, but they've their spies everywhere. Speaking as Your Majesty's servant—if I may say so, it might be advisable to wait. . . ."

He was rather surprised that he had been permitted to come to the end without interruption. Now the silence disconcerted him; his little cautious eyes sought the woman, still standing by her writing desk. As if in response to an appeal, she spoke with urgency.

"I do implore you, Sir, don't send that letter."

The two of them, he from one end of the room she from the other, regarded the man standing midway between them. M. Colbert did not like his Master's expression chiefly because he could not put a name to it. A disagreeable sort of smile he described it later to his wife. Louise shrank from it. Jules Mazarin might have comprehended it. Certainly he would have remembered a look observed on the face

of a young man long ago, when his pupil relieved him by putting Power in its proper place and relegating Love to hers. The master would have been proud of it, for the fruit of his years of patient culture was manifest in that smile. It was not angry, it was scarcely imperious. It was obsessed. He had heard what the speakers said, but they were not in his mind. If by some miracle the heart in thrall to that old bondage could have found the escape of speech he would have cried to them, standing there with their insignificant hopes, their insignificant fears, "Your words mean nothing to me. What do you know of me, you, my servant and you, my lover? You are *mine*, I am not *yours*. I am France! She is my slave and my Mistress, my delight and my pride, my lovely inheritance and my square field. In her I have my being. She bears me up. I bestride her like my blood-mare. She may at times be restive, but she knows my hand and I her temper. And you, in your ignorance, bid me dismount for fear she may throw me!"

Aloud he said suavely, "I will explain this to you later, Louise. You may go, Colbert. Report to me at the Louvre half an hour hence."

He held out the letter; the Minister took it, resignation in his clumsy bow. At the door he remembered his manners. Turning for his parting salute he saw that the girl was at the window; her back was turned, he could not see how she had taken her rebuff. But on his way downstairs (he went slowly now), he wished he dare snatch a moment from the King's business to look in on his good wife; he felt in need of an encouraging word and that comfortable woman would soon have told him he had done his best. She would have said what he wanted to hear, and then she would have run over to the Palais Brion to cheer up Mademoiselle as well.

Louis's mind, resolved concerning the main aspect of M. Colbert's bad news, now turned its attention to the lesser. He was furious, now that he had time to be furious with anything beyond that insolent check to his will, at the inopportune disclosure which must show him in a poor light to Louise. He had no intrinsic shame for what he had done, for to-day's duplicity or for his original false-dealing. It was not a course he would have chosen—to bring her

into a political intrigue—but it had had to be in the interest of something more important than such scruples. Already his mind was occupied with how best to handle the resultant difficulty. As he stood there, regarding her averted figure with some resentment, some tenderness, but chiefly with calculation, estimating which tactics would serve best, a phrase occurred to him. He had more than once addressed it to Marie-Thérèse. “You women are prone to exaggerate.” The tone he adopted towards her rival was borrowed from this commentary on his wife’s periodic outbursts of jealousy. It was at once an assertion of superiority, a belittling of offence and a consolation to the injured.

“I regret this. I understand you are distressed, but don’t make too much of it. It’s a question of government. It’s not a tragedy.”

She did not speak. He noticed that her forehead was laid close to the windowpane, her hands seemed to be pressed against it too. Her pose struck him as expressive of a desire to ignore him. She was probably going to be difficult, and he had neither the leisure nor the humour for much coaxing. She ought to be the first to understand his situation, to make allowances.

He resumed with a composure he was far from feeling :

“Don’t take it to heart. Be sensible. What does it amount to ? Circumstances obliged me to keep you in the dark in this matter. I did so for your peace of mind.”

She echoed, without turning, her voice sounding muffled :

“My peace of mind ! Where is it ? I have none.”

After a moment’s silence he heard another murmur.

“You do well to speak of my peace of mind.”

He seized on the outward manifestation of a contempt he imagined and which flayed him.

“I presume you have turned your back on me as the simplest way of expressing your displeasure. Don’t try me too far. I make allowances for you, but I dislike discourtesy.”

He was relieved to see her turn at this.

“Discourtesy ! You don’t understand me. I stand here because I want to be apart from you, from your influence, if only as much as a few yards. I do not want to hear you persuade me again that wrong is right.” She put out her hands as if to hold him off. “I must speak to you ; there is something to say, but I must think for myself first.”

"My dear, I can't wait now ; bid me good night and part friends."

"You can't spare me a few minutes after all this ? I'm not ready, but I'll say it now. Louis, listen ! I have never asked you for anything before. You said it was unkind. I don't ask for his pardon now. He has been found guilty ; the judges have found him guilty. I accept it. My request to you is only this. Abide by the decision of the judges—*your* judges. Do as you said you must do."

She said it slowly, earnestly, as if each phrase had its importance and must be carefully expressed.

As always when he was moved, the colour began to rise in his cheeks.

"You don't appreciate what you are asking. You can't. You know nothing of the enormity of what he has done, the danger he would always be at large."

"I understand enough of what he has done—of what *you* have done, of what you intend to do. I am very sorry for you both, but when I plead to you for him it is *you* I have in mind. If you love me, Louis . . ."

His face was deeply red now.

"Not this—anything else."

"I don't value anything else."

She turned away, straining her forces for a final effort. She looked blindly over the dark night spotted with quick, heavy falling snow. She did not see it, but the sense of rushing, enveloping movement affected her dizzily ; she held to the window frame for support.

He noticed the weakness of the movement and, anxious as he was to be gone, reluctance to leave her, distressed and unreconciled, held him. Exasperation at his own indecision joined to his sense of being at a humiliating disadvantage grew on him till he could scarcely trust himself to speak. He forced himself to say coldly :

"Well, it's useless to prolong this. Once again, good night, Louise."

He approached to kiss her, but the unresponsive still figure halted him. In another moment he would have turned away but her words stopped him.

"To use *me* to ruin him !"

At once he laid his hand on her shoulder.

"Stop ! There are words best left unsaid or we shall both regret it. I love you as you are, and despite matters

I would have otherwise. You had best love me for what I am. We view some things differently, more things than this ; in that which touches us both I have not forced you to do my pleasure ; in what concerns me only, do not attempt to influence me. This is an affair of my State—I act as seems good to me. You may ascribe my methods, my decisions, to what you please ; I shall not justify myself. I am responsible to no one. I may regret your adverse opinion ; it will influence me not at all."

When he had begun she had looked at him steadily but, at the allusion to their differences, she lowered her eyes, remaining quite still, looking down till he had finished and withdrawn his hand. Then she moved and walked quickly to the other side of the room. There she confronted him, with a distressed, anxious face.

"I don't presume to judge you or criticize you. You are the King. I am appealing to your heart. Can't you imagine what it means ? Imprisonment for life !"

He called up a hard laugh. "It doesn't mean bread-and-water, fetters or dungeon under the moat ! Fouquet will be more fortunate than the hungry devil who snatches a purse or robs an alms-box. No one is likely to brand the palms of that gentleman-thief ! He'll keep his soft bed and his good table and a valet to wait on it."

For all it was a sneer he intended it as a peace-offering, a half-gift ; he would have gone on in the same strain had he not been struck by the expression on her face. She looked frightened, standing there in the pretty dress she had put on for him ; the appeal of her helpless maternity was a reproach. How could he have spoken so unkindly to her ?

"Come, Louise darling, we mustn't quarrel. Forgive me if I said more than I should. Remember, I'm not myself to-night."

He spoke honestly ; he was sincerely concerned for her distress and regretted the loss of the self-control on which he prided himself. It was a shame to have upset her. He saw thus far ; never could he have imagined that the cause of the unhappiness apparent in her face was himself, not as he appeared in the passing heat of a sarcastic retort, but as earlier she had perceived him. The smile Colbert had stigmatized as disagreeable, which Mazarin would have understood, she had shrunk from as from the grin of Death.

It was only a glimpse, a shadow, the faintest foretaste of the bitter draught to come ; she had repelled it instantly but the sense of fear persisted, it led her to an older and more merciful terror.

"I do know what it means," she began quietly with no more than the warmth of one earnest to communicate an impression. "We lived once hard by a prison. I was ten years old—in bed with the fever. I remember it very well." The recollection came to life ; the bright, luxurious room gave place to a great dim attic, full of grotesque shadows and dark formidable beams above the bed. She crouched there, a sick and lonely child, afraid to call, afraid to listen, hiding her head under the coverlets, but nothing could shut out the Voice calling outside the attic window ; across the years she heard it again as she stood staring unhappily before her.

"I can't tell you what it sounded like, how horrible, that Bell. Such a cruel sound : not a happy peal like church bells on Sundays, but all one hard note—like tolling for the Dead !" He saw her eyes dilate, darkening ; her fingers stiffen. "But they aren't dead—the prisoners—they have to listen every day, always."

The fascinated eyes, the despairing voice perturbed him. He should be at the Louvre by now, he thought with vexation, but it was impossible to leave her in this state. Mme Colbert must be sent for to remain with her.

"Come, my dear, all this is bad for you. Why think of these childish fancies now ? It was years ago."

The unhappy eyes became conscious of him. "I can't make you understand. It's *now*—it's tolling *now* for him. They ring bells in those prisons, hour after hour, day and night, for meals, prayers, sleep. I used to dream . . ." Again the eyes forgot him. "I hardly dared to sleep for fear of the dreams. Tolling in the black winter mornings, tolling in the sweet summer dawns . . . No hope, no change . . ." She sat down suddenly, covering her face with her hands, and broke into sobs.

"The doors shut fast for ever. . . . Never to walk in the free world again or wander through the fields and woods. Never again to see those you love . . ." Among the shaking sobs he heard a strangled broken sentence ". . . never to see you again."

This was hysteria and must be controlled. But when he

knelt down beside her he was touched by the desperate fashion in which she clung to him.

"Put your arms round me, Louis. Don't ever let me go!"

Softened, soothing her, kissing her, assuring her he would not leave her till Mme Colbert should arrive, he blamed as the cause of this distress so pernicious for her, poor child, not himself, not tactless Colbert, not even her exaggerated sentimentality, but the man he had broken—for whose offences, real and unreal, he had no pardon, no mercy.

Hastening back to the Louvre, through the gloomy gardens, his quick feet crunching the hard new-fallen snow, the lanterns carried before him disclosing in swinging repetition patch after patch of startling whiteness, it was not of Fouquet he thought. It had been an uncomfortable half-hour, and had completely spoiled his evening, but sooner or later she would have had to learn the truth. On the whole he had come out of it pretty well. She bore him no grudge—not like that foolish boy-and-girl quarrel years ago. Not much danger of her running away from him now, his poor Louise, with her childish visions! He hoped she would suffer no ill effects from all this agitation: this solitary life was bad for her, she needed to be roused and amused. It was also confoundedly inconvenient for himself.

He cast a disparaging look backwards at the low house, a dark oblong rising out of the white ground. The lights had disappeared from her sitting-room. Colbert's wife, sensible woman, must have persuaded her to go to bed.

The Palais Brion had been well enough, but it had served its turn. As a setting for his mistress, it reflected small credit on the foremost Monarch in Europe.

PART TWO

CHAPTER I

"She filled her room with flowers. . . . That night they had Médianoche in her room."

OCTOBER, 1666

THE lace manufactory of Maître Guy du Bois in the Rue Quincampoix was a flourishing concern with a reputation for value and fine workmanship, not only in Paris but as far abroad as London and Madrid. M. du Bois employed three hundred lacemakers, embroiderers and seamstresses. He had several first-class designers and a competent staff. His factory, recently enlarged, was one of the most modern. His workrooms were spacious and light; his workwomen, expert and clean, could expect good wages, their treatment was a trifle peremptory perhaps, but paternal; there was a pleasant room for meals, a crèche for the babies in the convent hard by; nursing mothers were shown every consideration since M. Colbert, who patronized the establishment, had laid it down that a large family was a gift from Heaven and the King's service required a fertile population.

The Maison du Bois possessed the brisk atmosphere of success. It struck one in passing over the threshold with a reminder that doorsteps whitened in the Dutch fashion were not to be defiled by muddy French sabots.

M. du Bois, making his fortune, and his reputation no less, had been fortunate from the start. Inheriting a poor, tumbledown concern, half a dozen workers, a couple of frames, and a tambour or two, he had come under the notice of the new Minister in connection with taxes unpaid. M. Colbert had scented possibilities, he had nosed round a little and finally put the defaulter on his feet with a little capital, and abundance of good advice. But since his money was in the concern Colbert could not but foster it to success. Transport facilities, valuable introductions, priority in the

matter of hands. M. Colbert coaxed, forced and persuaded fifty first-rate operatives to leave Lyons for the Rue Quincampoix. This benevolent interest bore fruit. At the end of a couple of years M. du Bois was obliged to enlarge his factory, before long he was enrolled a Purveyor Royal—lace-maker and embroiderer to Her Majesty the Queen-Mother. M. du Bois began to look on himself as one of the royal family and when, in that past January, Queen Anne died of her incurable cancer, and the Court went into mourning, the worthy lace-maker donned a black suit and all his workwomen exhibited a black bow on the left arm.

From time to time M. Colbert would snatch a few minutes from his packed day to pay them a visit. He came unaccompanied, on a tour of inspection. He was glum, pessimistic and critical; but if in parting he grunted a "Good morning, you want eyes in the back of your head where work-people are concerned," M. du Bois took it as proof that he was giving satisfaction.

It was a great day for the establishment when their benevolent patron bade the owner prepare for a visit from Royalty. "Be sure you've everything in order and only the best work on show," the Minister admonished him. "Bring someone intelligent to show the King round. Someone with manners who knows what he's talking about. That Bondy fellow might do." M. du Bois got a sharp little look which intimated that he himself did not fulfil both conditions.

Therefore, it came about that on the afternoon of the 2nd of October, 1666, the building from roof to cellar was swept, scrubbed and garnished; immaculate muslin was stretched in the frames and tambours, arranged in precise rows with workers in their best aprons seated competently before them. The matrons sported brilliant coloured handkerchiefs round their heads and the coiffures of the maids, curls polished and twisted, yielded nothing to the modish ladies of Paris.

The proprietor, short, paunchy, with sparse and oily jet black locks and the yellow complexion of a man who passed his day indoors, was impressive in a new suit of sage green and a highly-laundered fall-over which pricked his fat chin. He gave a last careful look round before descending to the entrance, transformed with gay, home-made flags and expensive patriotic lilies. Here his understudy, young Bondy,

met him with trouble. Monseigneur (Colbert was His Lordship to most folk nowadays) had not arrived. He was ten minutes behind time already, he who was never a second late, after expressly stating his intention of appearing well beforehand to make sure everything was in order.

Five minutes passed ; M. du Bois shuffled his feet, cleared his throat and said, "What misfortune !" It was with something like terror he caught the sound of distant music. Here were the bugles and kettle-drums coming down the next street, and still no M. Colbert !

He took his oozing courage in both hands and, followed by his assistant, slim and dapper in chestnut brown, made a valiant way to the entrance carpeted in best quality crimson—a carpetry fit for a church. Perhaps after all the Minister would be with the Royal party.

He was not. Of the half-dozen gentlemen drawing up at his frontage not one was elderly, and not one was a frump. They were all magnificent young men in coats of scarlet or bright blue, with waving scarves, tossing plumes and luxuriant wigs. One sprang from his horse and in a trice held a stirrup ; another flew to a horse's head. Someone very fine and stately had dismounted and was walking up the grand new carpet ; he alone kept his hat. This must be the King.

Poor Maître du Bois copied his second in command and genuflected as if he were at Mass. Somehow he managed to stutter "Your Majesty . . . unforgettable honour . . . Monseigneur's absence . . ." But it was young Bondy who rose to the occasion and with marvellous composure uttered the proper servilities and got the King and his gentlemen safely upstairs.

The proprietor who knew, of course, that Princes are not as other men but copies of the Almighty and lifelike copies at that, was astonished at the surprising humanity of the Great. His Majesty was not by the half as stand-offish as many a wealthy customer, and much more appreciative than M. Colbert who, after all, had started in life not much better off than M. du Bois himself. It was wonderful to hear the King talk so kindly and simply, remembering their humble names as if he had known them all his life. He accepted Maître du Bois's apology for the absent Minister most graciously.

"Why, we'll contrive to enjoy ourselves in this good

company notwithstanding. What do you say, gentlemen ? ”

As for Monseigneur, he was a very busy man and no doubt engaged in saving the Kingdom at this very moment. Dutiful laughter ensued. Maître du Bois thought how easy it was to get on with fine folk when you got to know them. Young Bondy felt the weight in his stomach decrease and made ready to answer intelligently, like a lettered man, which he was.

It was made easy for him. His Majesty deferred to his knowledge of his trade, the Royal inquiries were sensible and to the point. The King appeared to discern qualities, to appreciate colour and form, with a preference for richness and bold design. Praise was generous but not indiscriminating ; it was bestowed on workers no less than masters. Both du Bois and Bondy were taken aback to behold King Louis's behaviour to the workwomen ; withered crones, fresh young girls, the grand feathered hat was lifted for each to whom he spoke and he spoke to many. It was Madame or Mademoiselle, and a smile to go with the word of approval as he stood watching busy fingers manipulating bobbins and silks. Maître du Bois was relieved to see that most of those selected for distinction were sensible, well-behaved women who didn't lose their heads or forget their curtsseys.

Once the King stopped beside a young worker, a hunchback with brown, intelligent eyes, bright in a dead white face—a sickly creature but a skillful craftsman. She was bade, kindly, to keep her seat. The employer held his breath for fear she might burst into tears and disgrace them all.

“ And what, may one ask, is this delicate affair, Mademoiselle ? ”

The cripple lifted her fine eyes. “ It is a baby's first hood, if you please.” She held up a scrap of gossamer lace. “ Rose-point.” The voice held yearning and pride.

“ It's mighty pretty.” The King spoke gently, removing a glove and stroking the delicate fabric. “ But tell me, is it suitable for a little child in cold weather ? ”

The girl smiled up at him. With an air at once mysterious and triumphant she drew out something from beneath her table.

“ This is quilted with satin to keep out the cold.”

"Very sensible," said Louis approvingly. "See here, Mademoiselle, what do you say to undertaking a commission—if good M. du Bois permits, naturally. I desire four, two somewhat larger for summer, two for winter. How long does it take to make your hoods, my child?"

"A week or thereabouts." She added quietly that she was not a quick worker and, flushing up, she begged that the King would accept the little quilted bonnet—she had made it herself, in her own time. His Majesty expressed himself delighted, but she must allow him also to be a donor. She had the Royal hand to kiss and two new gold Louis d'Or which M. de Brienne laid in her lap, and the grand folk passed on, the King actually carrying himself her little parcel of *papier-de-soie*.

M. du Bois had reason for gratification also. Not only did His Majesty express his high approval of the model factory, but gave practical proof of it. He bought a variety of articles, shawls and scarves, one expensive lace gown and a magnificent set of vestments. He made his own choice and knew just what he liked. He urged the courtiers to follow his example, asking where could they find finer Christmas and New Year gifts.

It was fortunate that, when M. Colbert's messenger arrived, the tour of inspection was nearly at an end, for after glancing at his letter, the King did not stay long. He remarked pleasantly that Monseigneur expressed his regrets for an unavoidable absence, he praised a set of hangings in gold thread and the airiness of the attic floor and found it time to depart.

The cavalcade rode off amidst a burst of cheering and waving.

"One must say we have a great King," said M. du Bois weightily as he turned back into his counting-house. He told young Bondy to give everyone a half-holiday in honour of the occasion.

The great King made his way through the streets of his capital, riding rather leisurely and with a loose rein.

Brienne thought he looked abstracted, but he sang softly to himself now and again which was usually a sign that he was in a good temper.

But Louis, riding, singing and reflecting was not altogether well pleased. Colbert's message, delayed because the bearer

had gone halfway to Versailles in hopes of intercepting him, had been disconcerting.

Mlle de la Vallière had given birth to a daughter at the Palace of Vincennes that morning. Colbert desired instructions.

She had not looked for it till the end of November at earliest ; one of the objects of his visit to Versailles to-day had been to make arrangements for her removal to her new house in the Rue de la Pompe. He had wished her to retire there earlier, but she had been disinclined to leave him. Now it must appear like an unnecessary affront to his wife in her own Palace. An improper occurrence ! Marie-Thérèse merited consideration ; she had behaved very well in the matter since his mother's death. She had ceased making jealous scenes in private, had even received Louise publicly. In fact she had made far less fuss over accepting her rival than Louise over his insistence that she should attend the Queen's drawing-room.

Louise, though still very dear and quite indispensable, was even more inconsistent than most women. Witness all these absurd scruples about meeting his wife, and yet this unnecessary scandal was a direct result of her procrastination.

"A little girl," Colbert had written. "I await orders."

Louis had no indecision as to the latter. The mischief was done, but the damage should stop with poor Marie-Thérèse.

The two sons whom Louise had borne had both died shortly after birth ; the parents had hardly known their children. There should be no lack of care this time. Mother and child must abide where they were for the present ; the Queen should remove to Versailles. The Court was due to go there in a few days time in any case. He would accompany his wife in the most respectful fashion and stay with her till the talk had begun to die down.

At this moment it was important to show his Spanish Queen all possible deference. She was the figure-head and *raison d'être* of the policy on which he had set his heart ever since his accession to power—the acquisition of the Spanish Low Countries.

Poor Marie-Thérèse—not a sou of whose dowry had ever been paid, to her bitter humiliation and her husband's great satisfaction. His father-in-law's recent death and that

unpaid marriage portion left him free to claim those debateable lands on her behalf. This enterprise was more important than the petty complications of his private life. The grandeur of France, the security of her northern frontiers hung on it.

A daughter ! Suddenly his heart went warm and soft. He was glad it was a girl this time. She must have every chance ; surely he would be able to keep this one. Difficulties, succession, illegitimacy were so much less important where daughters were concerned. There must be no assignment of *this* child to strangers ; if Louise could not, would not see where her duty lay, he both could and would.

There was a private entrance to Louise's apartments—he had the key and entered alone, carrying the little packet he had brought from the Rue Quincampoix. He ran up the stairs but entered on tiptoe, carefully though excited.

In the ante-room someone rose up and curtsied.

As he opened the bedroom door, he was aware of an extraordinary sound. Music. Music and singing—but he forgot it the next instant. For the bedroom was empty.

He could not believe his eyes. An empty room, the great bed made up and covered, everything in order ; and, mortal for childbed, an overwhelming perfume of flowers !

He stood, arrested by stupefaction, a man in a dream.

That incredible noise recalled him ; it surged into the room. He must have dreamt the letter—the tidings. No child had been born. Someone was giving a party in Louise's reception room.

His brain was dazed but his actions were deliberate. Four candles stood alight ; he extinguished them carefully one by one. Then he stole to the door and drew aside a portion of the curtain.

He saw it as a spectacle at a theatre, a stage set out garishly. Hundreds of wax lights glittered in the crystal chandeliers, repeated themselves in the mirrors, the silver and glass. Masses of flowers, tulips, lilies, roses—the candles made them gleam like multi-coloured stars. The whole room swam in brilliance and perfume. Across it the actors, some dozen men and women, gay and posing, strutted like a flock of peacocks, chattered like jays.

His senses winced as from a shrieking discord.

She sat in the midst of them all on a divan against a background of heaped silvery cushions—the heroine in a scarlet gown. Her neck, her bosom, her arms, sparkled with brilliants. The face was incredible ; dabs of carmine plastered on ghastly white cheeks, the mouth a hard, red line ; dark feverish eyes, glinting like cut sapphires from the shadows painted above and below, and, crowning this mask, the curls, powdered with gold dust, shone with hard brilliance like a wig of polished brass.

He could not have been more appalled if she had dropped dead at his feet.

But there was no mistaking the inspiration of the fantastic apparition ; a sick delusion stared through the crude disguise. She might have dressed for the part of an heroic concealment ; the effect was that of a worn out young harlot, a creature exhausted by excess but resolute to die as she has lived—reckless and unashamed.

Yet there was beauty in the deplorable achievement. The pose among the pale cushions held the attraction of contrast, the daring of a scarlet butterfly exposed on a white petal. The turn of the thin arm which held a wineglass aloft was tensely graceful. As she touched glasses with the man bending over her in an attitude of homage, the line of the raised face wore the strange beauty of the enhanced profile of Death. She was fine and repellent, truth told in a lie.

He saw all this. To his petrified mind it appeared a moment unending. In reality he had dropped the curtain instantaneously. His impulse, swamping incredulity, was to rush in, drive them out and rage at her. His instinct held him to its mould.

Years ago the boy in the invaded asylum of his bed had compelled himself to silence. Silence was still the defence of the man whose inmost sanctuary was outraged—this monstrosity was beyond words. The old time irruption into his home had been incomprehensible ; he recognized the significance of this manifestation. An alien pride fundamentally irreconcilable with his pride.

He saw her action as an offence beyond excuse or pardon. She had proclaimed from the housetops in what esteem she held his love ; to her, the birth of his child was a degradation to be concealed even at the risk of her life. To this had a conquering shame brought her.

"She's crazed," he muttered, stumbling down the entrance still dazed with the shock and trembling. "It's murder!"

Crazed or not, he had had enough. Proud? She was indecent! She did well to put herself on a pedestal of righteousness, to shrink from meeting his wife, to condemn him for Fouquet. She had no courage, only recklessness. She was a bad mother—what in God's name had they done with the child?

His head spun; he sat down on the stairs and held it in his hands. A fine pass for the King, sitting here, weak as water, while upstairs his Mistress was playing the fool to an audience which must needs be laughing at her for a simpleton who thought everyone as credulous as herself. Mocking him, no less. His breath caught on a sob.

He would finish with her! But as he vowed it, he knew he would never let her go. She was his elect, this woman panicking like a village wench caught out. He had preferred her from among all other women, he who never chose amiss. She was obstinate and wilful and full of false pride, but never could he admit that she was incapable of doing honour to his choice.

As he sat there, supporting his head, still shivering from time to time, the sovereign assertion of the man rose, an article of faith, to sustain his necessity for vindication.

His will was challenged, but he had the remedy in his own hands. He had borne with a humiliating situation overlong. He would put an end to it by acknowledging her publicly. Do now in fact, what he had always intended to do in his own good time.

He got up. He would go to his own quarters, get a drink, wash, find out what Colbert was about, deal with it sensibly. He remembered the child again and with uneasiness, as a helpless being in a world of madness.

"This way to the Fair, friends! Way, Gentlemen, way!"

It was the climax of unreality, this string of gibbering, prancing creatures, advancing and retreating across the courtyard in the tossing of torchlight. Revellers in masks, satyrs, piebalds! Horns reared above the blacked-out faces, caps and bells! But a familiar voice. Philip of Orléans had been invited to *Médianoche*, he and his good

friends. Behold them, hot-foot, to share the fun, to display a brilliant improvization to enliven the evening.

Exuberance died down at an obviously unfortunate encounter. The masks drew out of earshot. Only Monsieur, a trifle tipsy already, remained unabashed.

What did his brother think of his get-up? Philip twisted and giggled. "Fetching—what?" His man had been at it for the past week. Pluto, King of the Underworld! Effiat and de Beuvron were his familiars and Madame de Montespan yonder—"Tell the King your character, Marquise!"

From out the huddle of variegated figures a voice called:

"Persephone!"

Philip hiccoughed. "That's not what you said, my beauty! You didn't put it so prettily last time. The Devil's mate—that's what you said you were. She's my spouse—for to-night only, be it understood. Exquisite, don't you think, Sir?"

His brother's face was stiff with disgust.

"I'll be obliged if you'll transfer your—entertainment—to your own apartments. You may inform your guests *from me*," the emphasis challenged, "that Mlle de la Vallière is indisposed. I disapprove of *Médianoche*." His tone grew colder. "You appear to regard it as humorous to turn a fast day into a feast. To me it presents itself as an ill-bred disrespect to the Church. At best it is irregular. Good night."

"My God!" Philip stared owlishly after the disappearing figure. "You hypocrite! Irregular! Respect to the Church! I admire that, coming from you! Something's soured your stomach, that's plain."

He was indignant. The handsome Athénais, *née* Tonnay-Charente, now Marquise de Montespan, an irreproachable wife and mother, indulging in an unprofitable intimacy with this man impervious to feminine attractions, for want of something better to do, hastened to placate him. It was not difficult. A past-mistress in the kindred arts of flattery and ridicule, a couple of whispers sufficed to set him cackling again. For Monsieur's private ear—it must go no further, of course—but the reason for the poor King's ill-humour was so furiously amusing!

In Madame Colbert's nursery a bright little fire shone

cheerfully. Here were shaded lights, a quiet voice, order and peace. Madame's apology for keeping her low seat by the warmth was expressive of commonsense, the sane putting of first things first. A pity to disturb her in such a sweet sleep, the lamb !

The kind face beamed. It struck Louis that Colbert's wife must have been a pretty girl. He watched her draw aside a soft white shawl with tender precaution.

He had seen new-born infants before, ugly, red and crumpled. The Dauphin had been almost purple with streaks of pale, sandy hair like his mother's. This minute face was creamy, smooth and very peaceful ; tiny curls of dark hair, long dark lashes on the velvety cheek ; the brows were delicately pencilled. She was lovely, she was perfect, she was his.

He knelt to kiss, to trace the sign of the Cross in blessing. He looked up at Mme Colbert and appealed.

"She's healthy, isn't she? She'll live? What can we do to take care of her?"

Mme Colbert pinned her faith on a good wet-nurse. She had had some luck. A young woman, country bred, only confined two days ago. A carriage had been sent to fetch her and her baby too. A mistake to part mother and child. "They fret," said Mme Colbert sturdily, "and it sours the milk. Any robust woman can nurse twins, after all. I don't hold with parting mother and child ; it isn't natural when one thinks of it."

"You're in the right, Madame." He thought her a most admirable woman. Still on his knees he inserted his finger very gently in the tiny curled-up fist. It closed on it. Delighted, he looked up again.

"See, she's got quite a grip ; a character about her face, too, isn't there?"

Madame spoke as she thought. "She favours you, Sir. I said it the moment I saw her, as my husband will bear me out. His Majesty's very image, I said."

The man blushed with pleasure. He had thought it himself but had not liked to say so. Rather shyly he passed the kind woman the parcel he had brought from the lace factory. Together they admired the little bonnet, they admired the little head. They spoke of to-morrow's christening. Madame Colbert, invited to suggest a name, said one could not do better than place a child under the protection

of the Mother of God. Louis wished to add the name of his own mother also.

"Marie-Anne." He repeated it with pleasure. Comfort flowed through him like a healing draught. He had gained something out of this wreck. Now he would set to work to ensure its safe-keeping.

CHAPTER II

*(We Louis, by the Grace of God, King of France and of
Navarre, to all those present and to come. . . .
Letters Patent of Louis XIV, May, 1667.)*

ROYAL Letters Patent were issued ; their tenor astonished the world. Henceforth Bastardy can hold up its head, the moralists deplored. Paris had its nine days' wonder, the *salons* chattered, envied, conjectured. Her family were delighted. They ran in and out of one another's houses full of the great news. Entrenched at home, triumphant, they received visits of congratulation from their best friends and worst enemies. Persons who would have looked down their noses at a La Vallière a few years previously now discovered they were of the élite and sent them invitations to dinner. François La Vallière and his bosom friend, young Louvois—Le Tellier's son and high in Royal favour—painted the town red in an all-night celebration. M. de St. Rémy, that worthy stepfather, languishing in provincial exile, sent a pitiful epistle to M. Colbert. Surely doting parents should be permitted to offer a beloved daughter their felicitations in person ? And even an ancient aunt, living in a suburb, took her best gown out of lavender, assumed her gloves and boasted to incredulous, respectful neighbours, "My own cousin's niece—Madame la Duchesse de la Vallière !"

The attitude of the Hôtel Colbert was less enthusiastic. Madame had little to say. For her nursling's sake—her precious cherub Marie-Anne, growing prettier every day and so forward for her age—she was pleased. But she had misgivings. The standards resulting from a pious upbringing and a convent education could not easily admit a dubious

position as a subject of congratulation, however much it might advantage oneself. She tried to put her scruples out of mind, to perform the duties of her state, to supervise her husband's meals, her children's morals, her eldest daughter's entrance into Society, to watch over every movement of that precious treasure, Marie-Anne, who had possessed no other name till now. She spent her days looking-after them all. She heard an early Mass daily, weather permitting ; she kept the fasts and all the feasts, but every time she went to Confession she carried a load on her conscience. Where did loyalty and obedience cease to be virtue and become a partaking in another's sin ? She worried over this point as it affected herself and still more as it affected her husband who, growing richer and more important every day, became increasingly taciturn every night. " They say wealth doesn't bring happiness," sighed the poor lady.

Once, on her knees in church, trying to examine her conscience, doing her best to oust distractions—Henriette-Louise's cough ; Jean-Pierre's poor report from the good Jesuit Fathers ; would the Nurse remember that teaspoonful of honey for her baby that was not hers ?—the wife discovered with horror that she no longer respected her spouse. An awful admission !

Could it be possible that the companion of twenty-six years, the good, dependable husband and father who had worked himself to the bone to give them a fine home and a grand position, who never grudged them anything, who never interfered in the household, never glanced at other women (unlike that wretch, her sister-in-law's husband), who had cured himself of his one weakness, tippling, before he was twenty-three, had ceased to be her admired Jean-Baptiste ? Recoiling, she implored her Patron Saint to restore to her the frame of mind befitting a wife. But Ste. Geneviève seemed powerless to exorcise the demon of harsh judgment. She found herself regarding her partner as he sat at night, his books spread open, casting up columns, scribbling, cogitating some intricate problem or other, with something very like contempt. How bald he was getting ! How badly he stooped ! What an irritating habit that of whistling through closed teeth ! Stupid to work like that ! What was the use of making money if one was never to enjoy life ? Once, when the poor fellow, tortured by toothache, submitted to one of her infallible poultices, preparing it herself as she

had always done, she paused, spoon in hand, and thought what a fright he'd look once he had those teeth pulled.

"Ooch! It burns like Hell!"

"Hell's hotter than cloves and mustard seed," she retorted tartly, but sadly as well.

Madame Colbert's uneasiness did not stop at herself and her husband. She had a sentiment for Louise de la Vallière with whom she had had confidential relations for the past six years.

In spite of the intimate nature of the association, their acquaintance was superficial. It left the elder woman pretty much where she had been at the beginning of those six years, conversing with a stranger in her drawing-room, talking of schools and fêtes and gifts offered and received. Perhaps it was in consequence of this limitation that her judgment of Louise remained unaltered. "A good girl!" Madame knew that a good girl makes an uneasy sinner—that a virtuous upbringing has an inconvenient habit of intrusion. She prayed for Mlle de la Vallière every night, assisted the irregularity of her life every day, and brought up the subject at every Confession she made. The advice she received did not appear very helpful. One must withhold any assistance from another's sin; one must take every opportunity to counsel the doubtful, to instruct the ignorant. In any case (thank God for this!) it was always lawful, indeed laudable, to protect the innocent; in this case (no names, illustrious and terrifying, so much as breathed across the confessional grille), in this case it would appear a work of charity to guard an unfortunate child from the pernicious example of erring parents.

That was the only clear guidance Mme Colbert received from her Confessor, and with it she strove to be content for months together. The great news revived her trouble.

M. Colbert, unconscious of his fall from grace, unbosomed himself to his wife at night. The Letters Patent had been registered that day; to-morrow he was to acquaint the new Duchess, formally, with her good fortune.

"I feel a bit on edge," he confessed. "How do you think she'll take it?"

The answer was an irritable one. "How should I know?"

M. Colbert remarked soothingly that being a woman

herself and knowing Mademoiselle—Madame—better than he did . . . to which she retorted without mincing words, "D'you mean how should I take it if it was being spread all over the country that I'd lived six years with a married man—is that what you are asking me, Jean-Baptiste?"

Her husband explored his swollen gums tenderly.

"What nonsense you do talk at times! Just like a woman to drag a red herring over a simple question! I hope you don't go putting ideas in *her* head, that's all!"

His wife sat up. In her frilled nightcap and front of curl rags, a redoubtable figure.

"Red herring! What do you mean? I call a spade a spade! We're Christians, aren't we? Anyone might take you for an Englishman, one of those heretics who let a King have six wives at once—if you can call them wives! I don't put anything in her head; I don't get the chance; but if you ask me what I think, I don't believe she's forgotten what's right and what's wrong, if you men have. She's a good woman at heart."

"There you go!" remonstrated the weary man. "How you do take one up! Who said she wasn't a good woman? I hold her in the highest respect. I think she conducts herself——"

He was cut short. "And tell me this, my dear, tell me! Why do you respect her? I defy you to tell me!" she finished with bitter triumph.

M. Colbert, relinquishing all idea of comfort and good counsel from a strangely unsympathetic consort, told her with vexation that he respected Mme de la Vallière because she was a good influence and if that meant nothing to her it meant a deal to him and to a lot of other people.

The couple subsided into silence; the lady's substantial back leaving the culprit to the retribution of toothache and anxiety.

Unable to sleep, the sufferer made one last attempt at conciliation.

"You needn't think I had a hand in it. The King's had it in mind for years. He wrote it out, every word, in his own hand. And you needn't think I go there to-morrow by my own choice. And you needn't think I'm the only one who doesn't relish the job, either! The King fights shy of telling her himself, so he passes it on to me. You know what he's like once he sets his mind on anything."

The muffled voice was appealing, but the reply was cold.

"So you said six years ago. You said it then, I remember, and see what's come of it—hark! Was that the baby?"

She was up and out, barefoot, struggling with her dressing-gown, leaving her husband to deplore the inconsistency of womenkind. "She'll ruin that child before she's finished," he reflected with wrathful satisfaction, "and then I shall be blamed all round, I suppose!"

M. le Ministre Colbert, an elderly man sitting in his grand coach—he always sat on the edge of seats, never having time to take his ease—endeavoured to put himself in the place of the lady whom his King delighted to honour. Personally he approved of the Letters Patent, a copy of which he had brought with him on to-day's mission. Louise de la Vallière represented more to him than a Royal Mistress. She was at once his protégée and his patroness, an important member of his party. She had increased his indispensability to his Master. She was a pledge of his continuity in favour, and, with her disinterestedness and entire lack of political ambition, an asset for his policy of internal prosperity now in full swing. He esteemed the girl and considered that she deserved this good fortune which must make her more secure, and therefore himself. As for regarding her as a sinner—preposterous! She was something unique, above ordinary law and censure. Since the Queen had failed to please her husband another woman inevitably must. If Louise should fall from favour, either through her own scruples or her lover's inconstancy, the economical minister shuddered to think of what might ensue. One of these harpies—the Soissons woman or that Montespan, with their debts and their gambling! The interest of the Kingdom demanded that M. Colbert's friend should stay in her place. And surely now, recognized, enriched, titled, that place was safe enough.

"Pious scruples," girded Jean-Baptiste, sitting uneasily, thinking uneasily, his jaw stabbing painfully. "All very well for priests and nuns. She's doing her duty where she is—look how respectfully she treats the Queen—keeps in the background and never asks for anything. What more can a man want?" He assured himself that the King could

want nothing more, but remembering that, however gratifying it might be never to be pestered for things, a man liked to be thanked for gifts, he began to worry over the new Duchess's attitude to her rise in the world. "I hope she'll show a proper thankfulness; 150,000 livres income isn't to be sneezed at! I'll have to find it from now on, I suppose; and it would have cost double if I hadn't snapped up the properties before anyone knew who I was buying for." He consoled himself by reflecting on an astute bargain made and on the probability of his administration of the new duchy. Mme de la Vallière wasn't the woman to want to manage anything, and quite right too! If he looked after her affairs, the estates would be worth double in a year or two.

But he was incapable of relaxing in the satisfaction derived from such reflections. He must needs hark back to another anxiety, a bigger one. This business of the Spanish Low Countries. The King called it "taking possession of my wife's inheritance," the indignant Spanish Government "a monstrous invasion of our territory!" Something concerning which King Charles in London, Grand Pensionary de Witt at the Hague and the various Electors of Brandenburg, Bavaria and the Palatinate were pricking up their ears and asking—"What's this ambitious young Frenchman up to now?"

Colbert saw his Master's enterprise as a waste—an unproductive way of expending money and men. "Curse all wars," he groaned, but he had to admit that his self-willed Sovereign had chosen the right moment for that lesser challenge to Public Opinion—the formal acknowledgment of his mistress and her child.

France, that nation of sword-rattling fools, was yelling for glory and conquest and the King's popularity was consequently high now, when he was calling all men to witness that an unfaithful husband can be a good one where his wife's material interests are concerned. On the eve of his departure for the front when, mused M. Colbert with grudging sympathy unconsciously derived from his own last night's snubbing, even a jealous wife and an incalculable mistress might surely hesitate to embitter farewells by making scenes.

"Very clever," grumbled the Minister, gathering up stiff limbs and pulling up a scarf to his swollen cheek, preparatory to alighting, "but I wish he'd break it to her himself. No! I don't want anyone's arm," he told the imperturbable

lackey holding the door. "You fellows seem to think everyone as helpless as yourselves."

He went up the stairs of the house in the Rue de la Pompe reluctantly, for, like his wife, he was uncertain of Louise de la Vallière. He had come round to Geneviève's way of thinking. Mademoiselle was a good girl, a very good girl, but good women can be the very devil to deal with at times. Witness his wife last night.

His reception was a friendly one. After a few embarrassed civilities he began on the subject in hand. He came on behalf of His Majesty; on business which could not fail to be gratifying. Without more ado he passed her the scroll he had brought with him and a letter from the King, and watching her from under his shaggy eyebrows saw to his surprise that she opened the document first.

"Dear God!" After the exclamation, she went quickly to the further end of the room, and, with her back to him, stood there reading.

"We, Louis, by the Grace of God King of France and of Navarre to all those present and to come, Greeting . . . Our very dear and well-beloved and very loyal Louise de la Vallière . . ."

Her cheeks began to burn, her eyes fled down the page.

"A very special affection awakened in Our heart by an infinity of rare perfections . . ."

"Oh dear God!" she cried out again.

"Her modesty, which has frequently opposed Our desire to raise her sooner. . . . Our affection and Our sense of Justice permit us no longer to defer these tributes of Our gratitude. . . . Our tenderness for Our natural daughter, Marie-Anne. . . . Vaujours in Lorraine, St. Christophe in Anjou, Duché Pairie. . . ." These meant nothing to her. She understood one thing only—her heart held up to the world's gaze.

She flung the stiff parchment from her; released, it sprang back on itself as though alive, and rolled across the carpet.

Colbert, stooping stiffly to recover his insulted document, emitted a little grunt either from effort or exasperation. Recovering, he faced a red-checked young fury.

"Give it here, I'll burn it!"

His arms protecting the labour of a first-class scribe and a sheet of vellum of expensive quality, he expostulated.

"And where would be the sense of that, Madame? It's a copy, your copy. The original was registered yesterday. It's in the Archives."

"What!" She sat down and beat her open hand on the arm of a chair.

The visitor mumbled that he was concerned to see her so distressed and without cause. It was painful to him.

"I'm sorry if I'm angry." She made an effort to speak calmly. "It came as a shock. But I fail to understand. Registered! Surely it can be annulled—revoked—you'll do that for me, M. Colbert, surely?"

He stared at her, telling himself he recognized that wild look. Vapours! The best way to treat hysterical females was cold water and slapping. That being out of the question in this case, he assayed a splash of common sense.

"These Letters Patent have been registered by the Sovereign Court of the Parlement of Paris and by the Cour des Comptes. It is impossible to cancel Letters Patent legally registered. They are—they are"—he groped for a word which should impress her—"they are *inviolable*!" He seized it with grim triumph.

"These are a disgrace!"

Colbert observed her, sitting there, her face turned to the full light of the Spring morning, all that red in her cheeks and her hands trembling. She looked feverish—almost haggard. Somewhere at the back of his mind stirred a suspicion. She was losing her looks! It affected the man impervious to feminine charm unpleasantly, like a menace to capital invested abroad, out of one's control.

He inquired if he should ring for her maid, and was disturbed again by the sound of her laugh.

"Let her be. She'll know it all fast enough. They'll all be talking of it to-morrow."

Colbert, who was accustomed to take things literally, observed that outside official circles none knew anything yet. The *Gazette de France* was not out.

"What a reprieve!" and less bitterly, earnestly she added, "Monsieur, I'll not accept this. I cannot be compelled, and I refuse it."

Longing to quit this scene of unreason, his sense of self-interest obliged him to attempt a conversion to a more sensible state of mind. Sighing, he asked leave to sit, and

took a place at her side. Leaning forward, his face harassed, subduing his hoarse voice to a throaty whisper, he said he would speak as a friend, and, if he might say so, as a father. Her disinterestedness did her honour. But as a friend and a father and a man of business, laboured the persevering M. Colbert, he would remind her that one couldn't always afford to be unselfish. There was such a thing as parental responsibility—she had a daughter. There was also proper pride. Encouraged at having got so far without interruption, he proceeded to another consideration impossible to ignore—the uncertainty of life here below. “Even Kings are mortal.” He announced this astounding fact with a reserve expressed in a regretful turn of the husky voice, and an aversion of his sharp little eyes. Inspecting the fine carpet (he had bought it himself, a bargain), he took the opportunity of informing Madame of an observation His Majesty had made to him on this subject. That, having no intention of keeping out of danger while with his armies, he considered it incumbent on himself to ensure his daughter the honours due to her birth “and to yourself, Madame, an establishment proportionate to his affection of the past six years.”

He glanced up, reluctantly, in time to see her shiver. Determined, once for all, to make his point completely clear, he said firmly, “Madame, if anything happened to the King where would you be?”

He saw her face fall to sombreness.

“If anything happened to him I shouldn't care to live.”

She muttered it as if to herself, but he attempted the obvious consolation. A most unlikely contingency. During the campaign there would be no lack of devoted servants about His Majesty ready to give their lives to ward off all danger from him.

She repeated drearily, “To ward off all danger”; but he was relieved to see she was no longer in a temper. He hoped it would be safe to depart now, but the remembrance of extraordinary imprudences past, the flight to Chaillot, that regrettable affair when the baby was born—made him apprehensive; she might in some recklessness offend the King past forgiveness next time.

“I trust you will not take any action without consulting me—or His Majesty,” he added by way of afterthought.

Receiving no reply he repeated it. "I was saying, Madame, that I am convinced you will do nothing to upset this Settlement. It would be flying in the face of Providence."

She looked his way now interrogatively, with a little smile.

"Do you really think Providence has much to do with this, M. Colbert? You're a Christian, aren't you?"

His wife's question, repeated, affected him unpleasantly. Against this second trespass on his well-fenced conscience he hastened to erect his defence.

"I can't enter into that. This is the King's business. I carry out my orders, that's enough for me."

Once more in his coach, he hurried back to Paris and his office where all that Flanders business was piling up for him; Commissariat purchases, stores, equipment, the allotment of funds, the disposition of labour, an inexorable time-table presiding over all. He hastened to a burden which he worshipped while it crushed him, which he would sooner have died than lay down. He was cheered by the thought that Louise would be sure to be seeing his wife before long. A chat with a sensible woman could not fail to do her good. The habit of a lifetime is not broken by one attack. Jean-Baptiste Colbert, forgetful of his disappointment of the night before, relied implicitly on his Geneviève the morning after.

The lady who rarely left her family was expected home any time; the girl who had no family, a house in Paris, another at Versailles, a Castle in Lorraine, another in Anjou, and not a home in any one of them all, decided to wait. After a few moments spent in embarrassed civilities, Madame Colbert's gentlewoman companion made a hesitating suggestion—she never felt on firm ground with this distinguished visitor.

"Doubtless Madame would wish to see Mademoiselle Marie-Anne?"

Madame observing that that would be delightful, she opened the nursery door and withdrew in thankfulness.

On a low seat, her back supported by a cushion, sat a woman suckling a baby. She looked up at the entrance of the visitor, and the two exchanged curious glances. One saw a fashionable young lady, painted and powdered, in a

grand blue velvet pelisse, a beautiful blue-feathered hat set on top of her curled golden head; the other beheld an apple-cheeked young woman in a clean blue cotton gown. The fresh face, the firm mottled arms, bare from above the elbow, were freckled. The blonde hair, bleached almost to whiteness, was bound round her head in thick plaits and tied with stiff bows of black ribbon, one on each side. Below an untroubled forehead, wide grey-blue eyes opened on the new-comer in placid inquiry as she sat, the picture of contentment, with the infant nuzzling at her generous breast.

From time to time a broad felt shoe emerged from the blue skirts to stir a cradle from which came whimperings and the creaking of wicker.

Louise came forward slowly, half attracted, half repelled. The head of the suckling child was dark, its gown fine lawn and lace and pale blue ribbons. This was her baby.

"Do you always nurse her first?" Her voice held a strange reluctance.

"Oh yes, Madame, always."

"It doesn't seem fair that your baby should always be the one to wait."

"It's orders, Madame. The first draught's the richest, you see. Bless you, Madame, it don't hurt her to wait. Greedy little puss, you!" apostrophized the Mother affectionately.

Louise gazed down at the cradle. The baby, in a plain holland gown, was plump and rosy as its mother. It lay there, doubling up its legs, cramming fat fists into its mouth, sucking and squirming.

"I suppose someone ought to take it up," she thought, but it would never have occurred to her to do so. She would not have trusted herself to lift it from its crib. Occasionally, at Madame Colbert's invitation and once or twice to please Louis, she had permitted them to lay Marie-Anne on her lap but the baby had fretted immediately and all the time she had been on edge lest the little creature should wriggle off her knees.

Louis had teased her. The baby knew she wasn't to be trusted, he said. Himself he made nothing of holding Marie-Anne; he would take her from the nurse without a tremor and the child was always content with him.

Wondering, she regarded the mother sitting there placidly and her face, thin and brooding, seemed lost in cogitation.

She roused herself to ask politely : " I hope she's not troublesome, Nurse ? "

" Good as gold, Madame. She's just off now. I'll give her a moment to settle and lay her down. Very good, Miss Impatient ! I can hear you—no call to make all that to-do ! Your turn's coming. You just let me put Mademoiselle by first."

She rose leisurely, giving Louise the sight of a small, unconscious face, closed eyes, soft damp mouth parted, head hanging back in an ecstatic abandonment to slumber.

" Maybe you'd wish to take her, Madame ; you needn't fear to waken her. A thunderstorm wouldn't wake her now."

Louise declined hastily. She watched the brisk but careful wrapping, and when the woman had lifted her own child she remained by that grand be-ribboned cot. A baby was really a dear little creature ! She admired the silky twisting hair, the long, dark lashes, the roseleaf complexion, the perfection of the miniature hands. She ventured to touch one. " Her fingers are just like Louis's," she thought. " Even the nails. Oh dear, poor little thing ! "

But except for one misfortune, Marie-Anne was not to be pitied ; surely it was the other baby, pushed aside, who was the poor little thing.

Madame Colbert, entering hooded and cloaked, missal in hand, cheerfully apologetic, experienced a pang at sight of the young mother bending over her child. Something confused : part jealousy, part pity—a distress. It hurt her to witness it.

But Madame de la Vallière was quite ready to leave the nursery. Invited to drink a dish of tea, she accompanied her hostess to that formal drawing-room where she had spent many a bygone evening with her lover, stealing over from the Palais Royal on pretext. Here it was that Madame Colbert had first entertained a young Maid of Honour. Now, as then, the two ladies sat one each side of an expensive tea equipage ; again, the elder sipped from politeness, the younger with leisurely daintiness. Madame regretted her guest's lack of appetite : one could recommend these glacés, the macaroons were just out of the oven. Perhaps in consequence of her afternoon's excursion, perhaps because she hoped thus to avoid the introduction of a topic the guest

might have it in mind to discuss, she embarked on an enthusiastic description of the Mission now in progress at the Carmelite church in the Rue d'Enfer. The congregation was immense, the addresses so eloquent and yet simple; the celebrated Père César was one of the Missionaries. Maybe Madame de la Vallière found this conversation tedious; at all events she said little and soon rose to take her leave.

After Louise had departed, Madame Colbert asked her lady companion if she had remarked that Madame la Duchesse (the good soul could not resist the title), that Madame la Duchesse looked but poorly; she was so listless. The same thing had struck the poor relation, but then Madame la Duchesse frequently appeared absent-minded. "I sometimes ask myself if she grows a little deaf."

But Louise had heard sufficient of the tea-table chatter. On leaving the Hôtel Colbert, she directed her footman to drive to the Rue d'Enfer.

She had anticipated the usual Parisian church. A warm, friendly place with abundance of gilding, decorated statues surrounded with votive shields and hearts, alive with bustling, whispering folk. This was a desolate place. The service was over, it was almost empty and the late afternoon sun, slanting through high, unstained windows, gleamed coldly on pale yellow-washed walls. The Stations of the Cross, crude red and blue daubs, affronted from the colourless surface. The altars were unadorned, there was not a flower or a lit candle to be seen. On the high altar six cumbersome brass candlesticks flanked a bleak crucifix. The altar cloth hung meagre as an old sheet.

At the top of the centre aisle a stout woman knelt beside a bucket and scrubbed at the tiled floor. The thick figure seen from behind, buttocks bound round with a wrapper of sackcloth above the ugly up-turned boots, had the appearance of a clumsy squatting animal. She set about her task with a will, the scouring of the brush forming a harsh accompaniment to a monotonous chanting which proceeded from somewhere beyond the Sanctuary—a plaintive whine of thin feminine voices on two notes only. It was weak, but it was challenging, as if asserting the reign of ugliness in the sacrificial lives.

Louise recognized it as the recital of the enclosed Carmelite nuns from behind the barred and veiled grille. Entering,

quick and expectant, she stopped at the bottom of the church, chilled and repelled. She had come to pray, to kneel among others, to assist at Benediction, to adore the Sacred Host uplifted in the beauty of flowers and lights, supplicated by moving, familiar hymns. She had hoped to capture the word, the apt word, which should indicate that a merciful God makes allowances for a heart craving grace while clinging to a darling sin. This was no place for consolation ; no place to implore protection for Louis, setting out for the hazards of war, unrepented sin on his beloved head. Here was nothing, not even the grace of austerity ; only an empty church and a woman crouched over a bucket, scrubbing at a floor. She wished she had gone elsewhere—after all one should not expect comfort from the Carmelites. The Order was bitterly rigorous. Those secret women, singing feebly behind the bars which shut them off from the public chapel, led lives of hideous hardship. Their chapel was of a piece with their lives : repellent, stark, yet, like the miserable chanting, proclaiming this deprivation of all beauty to be their choice.

Louise shuddered, made a hasty reverence to the Sanctuary and went out.

In the porch a man, emerging hurriedly from a side door, just saved himself from colliding with her. He pulled off his hat, offered an apology and stood back to let her precede him down the steps.

CHAPTER III

THE footman, loudly repeating his directions to the coachman, was about to jump up behind, when the stranger, calling "One moment !", hurried to the carriage window and, hat in hand, addressed the lady within.

"A thousand pardons, Madame."

He besought a great favour. Since her destination was Versailles, might he beg a seat in the coach ? Urgent business—the King's service—called him to the Palace that night. Unexpectedly and most unfortunately he found himself without his own conveyance. His name was Bellefonds—Lieutenant-Général de Bellefonds.

Leaning forward, Louise met an anxious face under a full, dark brown wig. But certainly. A pleasure.

His foot on the step, the expression of his face altered.

"I ask your pardon, Madame. I do not wish to importune you."

He began to stammer. It was really of slight importance ; he would not incommode her ; he would find a post-chaise. She made some courteous insistence. The valet, door in hand, attended with passive impatience ; finally the gentleman, reiterating apologies somewhat too elaborate for the occasion, took the vacant seat and they drove away.

Avoiding the lady's face he began to fumble with a pocket book ; she perceived, through an embarrassed explanation, that he desired to offer her a proof of his identity and his errand. Waving the paper aside she said, graciously, that it was needless—they were acquainted.

"It was some years ago, Monsieur, at the house of M. Fouquet. Mlle de la Vallière."

He bowed—a grave recognition. His was a correct, conventional figure. The brown face slightly flecked with smallpox was finished with a small brown beard trimmed to a stiff point ; the carefully set perruque, the sober dark silk suit, its cut a trifle too formal, the solid old-fashioned sword-handle, everything about him was precise. He sat very upright, holding his folded cloak and feathered beaver on his knees, only his eyes were expressive : hazel but appearing darker by reason of deep-setting under dark, arched eyebrows, they were frankly ill at ease and avoided the lady offering conversational civilities.

She had set him down as embarrassed under an obligation when it occurred to her that perhaps this Commander in the King's service would have chosen to trudge the seven miles to Versailles rather than speed there in company with the King's new Duchess.

To her attempts at small talk he responded stiffly. Doubtless he was about to make the Campaign ? Unfortunately he was prevented. He agreed that the weather had all appearance of being favourable to the march. Certainly the Flanders mud could be most unaccommodating. Yes, he was acquainted with that part of the world.

To put him at ease she turned the conversation to the Carmelites. Somewhat depressing, was it not, the chapel ?

And that harrowing chanting ! It must be trying, always to sing unaccompanied by music.

She caught a glimpse of light-brown eyes as M. de Bellefonds remarked that these austerities were in keeping with the spirit of the Order. He was acquainted with the convent, perhaps ? She was informed in reply that his aunt was a Religious there.

Louise observed, lightly, that it would appear a terrifying life. M. de Bellefonds, gazing with interest at the quilted pale-grey coach lining, dissented gravely.

"My aunt is perfectly content. I have never met a more cheerful soul. She took the veil there thirty years ago, when she was seventeen."

All the carelessness had vanished from the voice which said suddenly, "It is only three years since M. Fouquet was imprisoned for his life !"

The eyes opposite flickered. "Surely a very different imprisonment."

Uneasily he was aware of her gloved hands moving over a jewelled bag lying on her lap.

"Doors are shut fast on both ! I would rather be dead !"

M. de Bellefonds, shrinking from the accent of emotion, felt it incumbent on him to observe that these holy Religious had great consolations in their heroic sacrifice. "As for my unhappy friend, I pray he may find consolation also."

She leant forward, demanding his attention by her attitude no less than her question.

"Have you news of him since he was sent to Pignerol ?"

The unexpected inquiry doubled his embarrassment, also the antipathy which had made him averse to entering the coach on discovering the identity of its occupant. Like all his world, he was aware of the rumour that the King's young Mistress, owing her rise to the Surintendant, had played some part in his downfall. There had been whispers that Nicolas Fouquet, the foolhardy, had considered his Sovereign's conquest a fitting object for his own ; that he had blundered in attempting to bribe her to his interests. In the circles of Olympe de Soissons and Athénais de Montespan it had been set about that the girl had yielded to her earliest patron before betraying him to the Royal admirer. Amidst all the rumours the truth remained obscure. Bellefonds, a sincere friend to Fouquet, had always refused to discuss the topic,

but it formed his opinion of Mlle de la Vallière. Beyond this sinister business he knew little of her ; they moved in different worlds. He knew, as all knew, that she had a reputation for inoffensiveness, that there were those, particularly in the King's family circle, Monsieur and the Prince de Condé, who spoke well of her. She appeared to exercise little influence over her lover though contriving to keep him for six years. There were women who attributed such ridiculous disinterest to stupidity. If she failed to profit from so violent a love affair it was because she lacked the wit. Her modesty was pure affectation. She, who was ashamed of her glory, had yet staged that indelicate preposterous scene on the very day of her accouchement.

Bellefonds kept clear of such gossip. Beyond avoiding Mlle de la Vallière at the few ceremonial functions in which he found himself in her company, he gave her no consideration ; he was not interested in such women.

Now, inescapably face to face, confronted with her unwelcome questions, his suspicions, his distaste hardened. She should learn nothing of the unfortunate Fouquet from him.

"Madame will doubtless appreciate that this is a subject one prefers not to discuss."

At the quick spread of colour in the face shaded by the big fashionable hat, he averted his gaze to his beaver, held between his hands. To his dismay he felt the light contact of her knee as, still bending towards him, she said earnestly :

"You need not fear to tell me. I should be the last to harm him or his. He was once my good friend."

He drew back as far as the seat allowed and, at a loss for words, kept his eyes determinedly down. The objectionable young woman, with complete lack of delicacy, reiterated her request.

Exasperated at his quandary, he said coldly, "I have no information to give you, Madame."

She brushed this away in a rush of words.

"But surely you are aware—you must have heard. What of that poor man who was hanged of late, he who brought out M. Fouquet's letter to his wife ; he was their groom, was he not ? It is too late to do aught for him, but there is another. You, who are a friend of M. Fouquet's family,

surely you are able to tell me if it is true that a gentleman has been sent to the galleys for his part in the affair. A relative of Mme du Plessis, I understand. His name is——” She broke off, a perplexity clouding her face, “Wait, let me think, I only heard it once—an uncommon name—it escapes me.” Her hand jerked against his knee. “What is the name?”

A startled expression awoke in his face. He stared at her. It was some moments before he spoke and in that interval he took stock of her appearance. She was not handsome, this notorious person. She had not even the poise of a woman of the world. A young, worn countenance, pale beneath its rouge, with hollow cheeks and large, fatigued, dark-blue eyes. Evidence of dissipation, opined the General, repressing the onset of interest. When he spoke it was still reluctantly.

“Are you acquainted with this gentleman, Madame?”

“I have never seen him in my life.”

He looked her in the face. “Madame, what is your concern with this unhappy man?”

She answered quietly. “Verangeville—that is the name. I would help him if I could,” and leaning back in her seat as if weary, she sighed.

Bellefonds bent forward, his face reddened with animation.

“Madame, it is strange that you should speak thus. My errand to the Carmelites to-day was expressly to obtain their prayers for M. Verangeville—his despaired cause. It would seem they are already answered.”

Her face drooped. “Do not build on it. I shall do all in my power, but I may fail.”

He smiled encouragingly. “You will not fail. The Carmelites will be praying for you—and others.”

She answered with dejection. “I have prayed for M. Fouquet often, but it has not profited him.”

Inexplicably at his ease with this surprising person, he told her that God’s ways are not ours; that miracles are all around for those with eyes to see and a captive’s salvation might lie in a prison cell. This was largely a repetition of the discourse held with the veiled nun behind the bars of a grille an hour previously, but to his listener his platitudes brought comfort. She felt towards him as a friend when promising to make her effort without delay and he heard her say, “I shall speak to the King to-night,” without

shrinking from such frankness. As to a friend, she proceeded to make him the offer of her carriage until he should be in possession of his own. It would afford her great pleasure. She had two others, rarely used, and it would be a kindness to exercise the horses.

To his later astonishment, he found himself not merely accepting without demur but making an incredible confidence. His travelling carriage had been seized for debt ; he was gravely embarrassed ; it was precisely because of this circumstance that he found himself under the necessity of requesting leave of absence from the campaign. He thanked her from his heart ; her offer came as a God-send—the second that day.

Now contemplating the face opposite, he found it attractive and wondered that he could have ever thought it dissipated.

The King, whom no one in their senses would have ventured to keep waiting for half a minute nowadays, had already waited half an hour in the house in the Rue de la Pompe. That careful organizer, parcelling out every hour of his last few days before departure, had allotted this evening to Louise. In the cream and gold-panelled drawing-room, pacing over the lilies and tulips of the handsome Savonnerie carpet (that good bargain of Colbert's) he had reached a state of dignified exasperation by the time he beheld from the window the manner of the delinquent's return. The unpunctual lady alighted in style on the arm of a cavalier who saluted her hand and remained bareheaded in the roadway until the house door shut, whereupon he actually re-entered her coach and drove off in it. Louis turned to greet his beloved with mingled annoyance and curiosity.

She ran in, just as she was in her sapphire velvet cloak and big hat, gaily, without a word of apology. Her eyes were bright and her cheeks pink ; she was looking uncommonly pretty and obscure suspicion pricking at the back of his mind, he said warmly :

"Where in God's name have you been ? Do you know the time ? It's after seven !"

"Oh, not so late as that, surely !"

It might have been six years ago at the rendezvous in the Summer House. Now, as then, he refused to respond to her smile.

He indicated the high marble mantelpiece. "Look for yourself!"

She glanced from the accusing face of her lover to the accusing face of the clock. Her smile coaxed. "I'm unconscionable. I forgot all about the time."

"In entertaining company."

"Are you jealous?"

She offered her face for his kiss. A cheerful face; scarcely that of a woman whose lover has come to bid her adieu before departing for the Wars. He was prepared for some measure of reproach for the Letters Patent, a grievance which should soon dissolve in the tears of parting. A scene would have been preferable to this unflattering levity.

He assumed smooth dignity. "I perceive you are on excellent terms with M. de Bellefonds. First he shares your carriage, then he appropriates it."

"Only a loan."

She spoke negligently, loosening her mantle and tossing it over a chair; the hat followed. Sitting down she began to strip off her long silver-embroidered gloves; the soft fair hair disarranged by the hat, fell forward in loosened ringlets over her face. Louis watched her in silence till, one of the gloves slipping from her lap, he bent for it and, straightening out the fingers, placed it carefully on a table. She passed him the other and shaking back her hair smoothed it each side of her head.

"Tiresome Louise, who can never learn to be tidy, who parts with her coach to strange gentlemen! Do you fear he may forget to return it?"

"I wouldn't say it was impossible. He, also, boasts of a poor memory."

He spoke sarcastically, but, because in the last few moments she had become of more importance, a possession vaguely threatened, and because she was looking prettier than he had seen her for months, he sat down by her, pulled her into his arms and kissed her repeatedly.

"I sometimes ask myself why I tolerate your audacity. It would not astonish me to be told you had planned this expressly to punish me."

"To punish you?" Her eyes questioned.

"For daring to give you a Duchy."

"Oh that! It was not in my mind."

Further piqued, his arms tightened. "Anyone might

think I'd made you a present of a pair of gloves ! Like those you've just flung on the floor ! ”

She freed herself. “ As if I would ever try to hurt you. I was upset at first. I never desired it, but I suppose you know best. It's not important now, don't let us discuss it to-night.”

But he, whose intention had been to avoid the topic, as far as practicable, must needs now dwell on it. Instinctively he felt he had somehow lost ground with this woman of whom he had been completely sure for years. Suspicious of the sudden indifference to a course which she had always opposed, he began to cry up his motives. Her position, left precarious too long against his desire, his duty to her and to their child. He touched with complacent lightness on the risks inseparable from war, and concluded generously : “ It's the least I could do for you.”

It might have been Colbert all over again. All he got for his pains from the girl sitting her distance from him was : “ I thought maybe *you'd* done it to punish *me*.”

“ My dear Louise ! ” He begged an explanation of a preposterous statement.

“ You threatened to do as much when you were angry—after the baby was born.”

Threatened ! Angry ! What words ! Did she think he held that folly against her after all these months ? He considered he had displayed, even at the time, a remarkable forbearance.

“ Do me the justice to recall, Louise, that I attributed your imprudence to your state of health. My very just censure was for those in attendance upon you. I was mighty temperate, bearing in mind the risk you incurred.” He closed on a note of feeling. “ You might have lost your life ! How should I have felt then ? ”

She echoed softly, “ I might have lost my life.”

“ But thank God you didn't.” He spoke briskly, turning towards her. “ And henceforth, my dear, there will be an end to undignified secrecy and pretence. You have a fitting rank and a proper establishment. Marie-Anne will take her place as my daughter. It rests with you to hold your own.”

As she did not speak but sat there, her face still and abstracted he touched the arm nearest him, gave it a little shake and repeated with emphasis. “ I have made

everything easy for you. You have only to hold your own."

She gave him a slow, enchanting smile. "No more than that?"

Because of the smile, he passed the mockery. But she must take her new station seriously. She owed it to him as well as to herself and their child. It was easily within her power. Her deportment, Louis allowed kindly, was invariably graceful and unaffected. All she required was a little more consciousness of her position. It was scarcely for him to say that this should be a matter for pride, he added with weighty abnegation, but he made it obvious that there could not be two opinions about it.

"If I may be permitted a criticism, my dear, it's high time you grew up. You are not seventeen now, but a Peeress in your own right—the mother of a Child of France."

She said it after him. "'A Child of France!' How glorious it sounds! Little Marie-Anne tucked up in her cot and her nurse all her world!"

Although he had seen her only yesterday on his way through Paris, Louis was interested to hear all about the baby. It was a pity Louise had not paid her a visit yesterday also. They could have returned in company. Where else had she been?

He listened to an account of the Carmelites, of Bellefonds and his predicament. He stopped himself in time from instancing this as superfluous condescension, but she said it for him.

"I suppose a Duchess would have done better to let the poor gentleman tramp to Versailles on the King's Service?" And her eyes, tender and mocking, interrogated the dark, serious face.

Louis, whose interpretation was matter-of-fact, observed that that might be going too far in the other direction. She ranked as a married woman henceforth, there could be no impropriety in assisting an eminent officer who, to give him his due, bore an irreproachable reputation. To offer him the use of her carriage for an indefinite period was perhaps excessive. Settling himself comfortably on the settee, stretching out his legs, Louis gave it as his opinion that Bellefonds was in a bad way.

"I would wager a hundred pistoles that coach of his is

being held for debt!" It was a most unsatisfactory state of affairs for a General of France, but if the man needed assistance his proper course was to apply to the King. He desired Louise to avoid anything of the kind in future. Bellefonds was a capable officer, a pious sort of fellow—"but retreats at the Trappists and novenas from all the Carmelites in France won't pay his creditors, poor devils!"

"Who knows? Don't you believe in prayer, Louis?"

The heavy eyebrows lifted. "Has he been preaching to you already?"

"Praying rather." She said it lightly. "He prayed me to do him a service."

"Holy Blue! Another! What does he want this time? Your pearls perhaps?" He laughed, but he frowned at the thought that already advantage was being taken of her elevation to beg from her.

"Well, what was it?" he repeated.

Louise rose. Standing before him, her hands clasped before her breast, in an attitude at once resolute and supplicating, her words, her tone, a contradiction in their vagueness and indifference, she said, "He only wants your pardon for someone or other." Turning away, she walked slowly to the table and with her back turned to him, took up her gloves one after the other.

His voice, indulgent and curious, followed her. "He hasn't lost much time in establishing relations with Madame la Duchesse. Who is he—this precious protégé?"

Without turning, languidly drawing the soft kid through her fingers, her voice only a little above a whisper, she answered, "I'd rather not talk about it just now, Louis."

"No sense in putting off the evil day, my dear. What's it all about then? What is the man's offence?"

She raised her voice. "He tried to help M. Fouquet."

At once he laughed. "And you are interested in him?"

"I have never seen him in my life."

"Well, you've lost nothing. The name is Verangeville. A young idiot with more daring than brains. A dupe of those more cunning and more cowardly than himself. But I fail to see wherein he concerns Bellefonds. He would be well advised to keep out of this affair. But you may expect

this kind of importunity in future. People will look to you for all sorts of favours. It's natural they should do so. No one," observed Louis amiably, "could say you had abused your influence with me."

"What is my influence with you?"

Something in the quiet question disconcerted him. He appeared to consider, not looking at her. When he spoke it was thoughtfully:

"You have influence. Why do I come here? Why do I wish to make you respected and secure? No one has influence with me in State affairs. I weigh advice from those competent to give it, but influence—no! Favours are another matter: I have not forgotten that I owe you one. I should be happy to gratify you in this small matter, my dear Louise, only"—he paused—"only, you're too late—your man is pardoned already."

His face brightened in a smile boyishly mischievous and triumphant.

"Louis!" There was no doubt of her delight as she ran to put her arms round his neck.

He had looked into the affair, he told her, and decided to quash the sentence as excessively severe. The wretched young fellow was more fool than knave—not the real culprit. He was at large in Marseilles, subject to police supervision but free to come and go within the limits of the town.

"So long as he keeps clear of his associates he'll be all right. If I find him communicating with any of the Fouquet set again . . .! The outcome of it all, Louise, is that I shall have the pleasure of supporting a fool in idleness for the next year or so. Keep this to yourself for a few weeks. By that time you can inform your friend the General that his protégé owes his liberty to you."

She protested indignantly. "I'll do no such thing. I shall tell him the truth—how generous you are—he ought to be told."

His good humour restored, he told her that if she considered he merited a reward he would choose supper. It was past the hour. They might eat it out of doors, perhaps. Would she take pity on a hungry man and make haste to change her dress?

The little paved garden, separated from an orchard by

wooden palings hidden by climbing plants and some young, espaliered fruit trees, caught the evening sun. The trees were in blossom ; a fine lilac in full flower perfumed the soft still air. Dwarf orange trees in stone vases stood at regular intervals round a neat oblong of grass, in the centre of which a nymph, watering-pot on shoulder, stood in an attitude of expectation ; the pure Grecian profile raised towards the plumes of delicate rain appeared to question the unending, joyous ascent springing from her pitcher.

The table had been set under the lilac, facing the pink and white orchard ; a servant withdrew from it noiselessly and Louis, strolling up and down inspecting the fruit trees and an old vine trained at back of the white stone house, waited for Louise.

It was a month since he had last visited her. Nothing unusual at this time of the year—a concession to the religious duties made of necessity each Easter. A farcical separation !

But this year for weeks prior to Easter he had had little leisure for her. For longer still, ever since the birth of Marie-Anne, his unavowed resentment had lain an estrangement between them ; he sought her more rarely ; sometimes he was conscious of uneasiness when with her, but he gave little thought to this. He had his life apart—his Ruler's life crowded with multifarious duties and absorbing, satisfying work. Kingcraft occupied him more and more, and the incessant routine of the Royal household which he had ordered and formalized made up the frame-work of his days. His mistress had nothing to do with the first, little with the second. She visited the Court from time to time, reluctantly, when he required it of her, but she held no Office there. Her charm for him had lain precisely in her isolation from his public life ; for years he had sought her for the brief repose of his energetic youth, for the comfort of loving-kindness. No two-edged words to irritate, no double motives to suspect. As the tide of his success swelled and with it his self-sufficiency, his urge for this gentle solace lessened, but force of habit was strong in him and supplemented the diminishing attraction. Yet in some sense he recognized it as a loss and, characteristically, must set to work to recover it. The day for simple joys being outgrown, the time was ripe to transplant his flower from the once grateful shade where she had bloomed for him alone to the noonday splendour of

his real life. His vision, far-sighted in Statecraft, in fathoming the motives of men, was blind to the quality of the woman with whom he had lived for six years. His picture of her was only superficially a likeness. He saw her as his lover, disinterested, tender, sincere, subject as most women, perhaps more than most women, to act on impulse, but never beyond the power of his persuasion. In the ostentatious rôle he designed for her, he foresaw no tragedy, no failure.

In proportion as his romance faded in usage he reached out for the permanence of union. His wife being what she was, his mistress must become his consort, live at his side, play her part in the pageant of the throne. A figure to be proud of—to minister to pride. But other, and less worthy, motives had inspired his recognition of Louise. She had bared an unhealed wound with her words "to punish me." He had not overlooked that offence. It had brought his first misgivings concerning her, the first questioning of his power. A check and a fear. He refused to entertain them. Unconscious of tyranny, in inflexible patience, he designed to mould her to his image of her. She was his, even more than all around was his; everything she knew of love, almost everything she knew of life, was from him; that he could have mistaken the substance of his possession was unimaginable.

Yet there were moments when Louis, nearing thirty, could still recapture something of the vision which at twenty-two had seen love at first glance. If it no longer shone in splendour, it stole back at a remembrance, a loneliness within himself. But the longer they were apart the fainter the call; for months now he had come to regard her as a dependant to be provided for, a connection to be brought into satisfactory relationship, rather than as the beloved.

Now, on this reunion on the eve of a longer separation, something of the spell returned. His heart stirred at sight of her advancing down the garden to him. The graceful silk gown, lemon colour patterned with lilac, floated out as she walked; the pale silken curls shone on bare shoulders. She had made up her face delicately, and it smiled towards him. She was young and sweet; she reminded him of happiness and when she called gaily, "Isn't it lovely out here? Lovely evening, lovely supper, lovely company!" he

told himself that she was very dear to him and it occurred to him that this modest home life, which lesser men accepted as a matter of course, was worth the having and would be something to lose.

The slanting sunshine struck warmly across the tops of the pink and white trees heavy in the orchard. The fountain sang with the thrushes. In the little garden, peaceful in the country evening, sweet with lilac, Louis and Louise sat facing each other across the supper table, he doing justice to the cold fowl and freshly tossed salad, the excellent game pasty, the cool sweet wine, while she forgot to eat in listening attentively to all he had to say.

He explained in careful detail the arrangements he had made for a weekly service of letters between them. He spoke of Dr. Vallot whom he desired her to consult for her loss of weight and poor appetite, of the succession of flowers and plants to be sent to her regularly from the new gardens at Versailles, hard by. He had much to relate of Marie-Anne (that child to be proud of), whom Louis looked to see toddling by the time he was back. He touched on his outward route march, where he would be on such and such a day, but made no reference to his great enterprise at the journey's end. He possessed largely the facility for leaving business behind him; it had its part, its pre-eminent part, but lesser things had their occasions too. What pertained to this one was the charming garden, the still dear companion, kindness and the making of love. If his darling Louise found herself lonely during his absence, what about inviting her brother's wife to hold her company? Nothing could be better than that unobtrusive young woman Gabrielle de la Vallière, and Louise must be sure to follow the worthy Vallot's instructions; if she had not put on flesh by his return Louis would suspect her of pouring her physic out of the window as once an egg and milk nogg at the Palais Brion. He suggested that the baby and nurse might come here for awhile; the country air would be more beneficial for Marie-Anne than Paris in the summer. Better leave her with Mme Colbert? Well, maybe she was in the right but it was a thing to bear in mind.

Into this pleasant conversation he carefully slipped a necessary and not so pleasant communication. A duty visit to his wife. He had arranged for Louise to take her Duchess' Tabouret at an early date. Unavoidable etiquette,

and he had settled it all for her with Madame de Montausier, the Superintendent of the Queen's household. His brother had promised to be present, to escort her ; she would meet with every consideration. Louis relied on his sweetheart to meet his wife half-way.

Hurrying from this uneasy admonition, he expatiated on Philip's cordiality. He bore an invitation, a joint one, for Louise to visit Monsieur and Madame at Mouchy. His sister-in-law, something of an invalid nowadays, was keeping her bed in hopes of staving off another miscarriage—her third.

"But she won't stay there," said Louis frankly. "My brother bores her to extinction and unless someone can drag him from Mouchy it will be good-bye to the son and heir ! "

He broke off. Unseen behind the fruit trees, violins and flutes were striking up. After a few bars a man's rich, cultivated voice rose above the instruments. He sang the Spring Song from the "Ballet des Saisons," the eulogy of youth—trees in blossom, opening flowers, lambs gambolling in new green fields, the first embraces of young lovers. The accompaniment quickened, danced, then slowly languished into the tempo of courtly wooing.

*"Jeune bergère, en qui le ciel a mis
Ce qu'il donne à ses meilleurs amis,
Du beauté, du cœur et de la sagesse
Et, si je crois vos yeux, de la tendresse."*

The song was a homage to the lady sitting in her garden. It had been extemporized in her honour at the Royal and Amateur Ballet performed at Versailles on that past New Year's Eve. The graceful compliment with which Benserade had greeted the entrance of the King's young Mistress as a shepherdess.

*"Que vous peut on souhaiter et quel bien ?
Je crois qu'il faut ne vous souhaiter rien.
L'on ne saurait croître un bonheur extrême,
Et, pour tout dire, enfin, que sais-je même,
Si, méritant tant de prospérité
Vous n'avez point ce que vous méritez."*

Louise's eyes glistened. Her little triumph ! She remembered how nervous she had been, but she had never danced better, and after her dance Louis had come to her side to support her under the applause. He had taken the part of a Shepherd, they had stood before that Royal and critical audience as Arcadian lovers. Everyone had appeared to regard it as natural and admirable. She had been put at her ease, then and at the banquet to which Monsieur had escorted her and where Philip had drawn everyone's attention to himself by his telling hits and witty anecdotes. She had sustained that ordeal tolerably ; Louis had admired and praised her. Surely it was in her imagination that he had since grown aloof. Naturally with all his great projects he had little leisure even for her.

She put out her hand across the supper table ; he pressed it but neither of them spoke till the music had ceased.

"Benserade has put it perfectly," he spoke with deliberation. "It was appropriate then, it is more so to-day. It is what I ask you to remember. Assuredly you deserve all good fortune ; recognize that I have done my part to give it to you. Rest content while I am absent ; give me the satisfaction of knowing you content." His voice lightened. "To my Duchess—the best of everything !" He tossed off his glass, set it down and came over to her. His arm round her waist, he called for the Shepherd's dance—that would suffice for to-night, *Messieurs les Musiciens* !

The gay measure tripped into the garden. Louis pulled her up to dance with him. They danced in the last of the evening sunshine under the high pale blue sky where rosy clouds drifted lazily. The lilac expended its perfume, the fountain sprang aloft and behind the rose-flushed bouquets of the fruit trees a huge glistening orb melted blindingly in waves of deep crimson and dusky violet. They danced up and down the velvet-smooth lawn, dancing as lovers dance, looking into each other's eyes, yielding to themselves and to the rhythm. His low voice wooed.

"Do you remember our first dance together ?" (Do I remember ?) "You ran up the ballroom like a breath of wind. You were in a pale grey gown and your hair smelt of roses. . . . I was furious because I thought I stood no chance—and I called you Sylvia." (Do you think I don't know ? You wanted me then when you first came ; you

want me now when you are going. Do you think I don't know you ?)

"My pretty Sylvia ! " He sang it. "That adorèd she might be ! " (Stop ! Why do you make it so hard for me ?)

The music was silent. Half the burning sun dissolved to flame. The tree trunks of the orchard stood out black ; their snowy heads were ghostly now ; a faint chill breeze rustled the lilac and Louis was comforting her.

"Don't cry, my cherished. Why are you crying ? "

He expected her lament, "Because you are going away ! " But she did not make it ; she could not bring herself to say anything, least of all the words she had carried in her heart all that day long. . . . "Go now—now is the time—while you still love me—leave me to-night ! "

Good-byes were said in the early morning. By candle-light, mournful in the inconsolable grey of first dawn. He sat on the bed in his horseman's coat, his stiff lace cravat, the brown hair tied back for riding. His words were of regret but she read his face ; it was not sad, it was eager. She felt him gone from her already even when clasped close, the hardness of the leather coat bruising her breast under the thin nightdress.

"Adieu ! Je t'aime bien. Cher Amour, Adieu ! "

She did not go to the window to watch him ride away. She saw him only too plainly as she lay in her bed, face buried in his abandoned pillow, hands thrust under it, hoarding the warmth which was her last of him.

CHAPTER IV

JULY, 1667

"*Quoi ! Avant la reine ?* "

(*Louis XIV to Louise de la Vallière.*)

THE Duke and Duchess of Orléans, *tête-à-tête*, perforce, for a month, had decided on making the best of a misfortune, to acquit themselves passably in the rôle of affectionate spouses. Madame had her little group of loyal and admiring

women, her novels, English and French, sittings for her portrait, and her weekly epistolary gossip with her brother Charles. Philip's resources were fewer ; most of his intimates had been called, willy nilly, to the Flanders front ; he disliked reading ; he disliked his wife's friends ; he had no patience to sit still for Mignard or anyone else ; no letters to write and none worth the reading to receive. But there he was, shut up in exhausting boredom, all because his wife could not carry her babies like other women—fatiguing, repellent subject, moaned Monsieur, to himself and to anyone he could find to listen.

Therefore he welcomed, unfeignedly, the arrival of Louise de la Vallière and her sister-in-law, the Marquise. What a pity he was not forewarned of their coming, cried Philip, his reputation concerned to offer a really worth-while supper. They would have found something fit to sit down to. As it was . . . As it was they supped meagrely on two cream soups and a strengthening bouillon, delicious salmon simmered with a sauce made from the royal epicure's own recipe, Fricassé of chicken, an incomparable lark pie and sweetmeats of every variety under Heaven. The champagne might have come thence, and the banquet was seasoned by the sallies of a host at his best.

In her character of understanding wife, Madame Henriette comprehended that Louise de la Vallière had not come from Versailles to Mouchy purely for the pleasure of inquiring after her health, and she sacrificed her evening in the good cause. So, while she lay on her chaise-longue and drew out tongue-tied young Gabrielle in the kindest fashion in the world, Monsieur took his other guest for a turn round the gardens. Taken by surprise, he had not had time to make a really impressive toilet. His well-featured, discontented face was tinted a new shade of pallid green ; the rouge laid over it accentuated the languor and went well, Philip considered, with a straw-coloured satin striped with black. The coat was cut exaggeratedly short, the black and gold sash, exaggeratedly broad, was tight around his small waist. He looked rather like a large wasp with his petticoat breeches frilled like a dancer's, as he strutted on his high-heeled red shoes, twirling his ribboned cane, half a dozen spaniels barking and scampering round his legs. Monsieur fancied himself as a man of taste and fashion, sauntering in his grounds with this pretty woman on his arm.

He had a weakness for good-looking females who could be trusted not to expect him to make love to them ; ladies with whom he could safely indulge in those passages of risqué compliments which confirmed him to himself as a disillusioned wit.

For Louise de la Vallière he had a special inclination ; it bore a resemblance to the moderate championship of an attractive sister-in-law wasted on an undeserving brother. During supper he had not been so absorbed in his posturing but that he had remarked that the guest looked poorly.

"What's Louis worrying the poor girl about now ? " was how he put it to himself.

So, graciously, he took her the round of his gardens ; bespoke her admiration for his pink-and-cream-tiled bathing pool, its sides lined with mirrors wherein one could behold oneself and one's friends as God made them. "You'd be appalled to find how mighty few folk repay undressing my dear ! " . . . And the fountains, poor compared with those gigantic affairs they were installing at Versailles, no doubt, but rather attractive in their way. Better taste perhaps ? They were rather overdoing things at Versailles—too heavy—too much of everything. What did she think of his Aphrodité ? Naughty, wasn't she ? Shock Louis ! Talking of Louis, he seemed to be carrying all before him. "Magnificent effort," drawled Monsieur, "though those Spanish fellows don't seem to be putting up much of a defence. At Avesnes, isn't he ? He'll be writing from Brussels next post or so."

Thus tactfully heading her on, he was repaid when she said in that pleasing, fluttering sort of voice of hers, "I'm afraid I don't know much about Brussels—but what would you think if I went to Avesnes ? "

Monsieur, constitutionally disinclined to call a spade anything so obvious as a spade, hedged. Wouldn't that be a furious fatigue for her ? Filthy roads—not a civilized house for miles—not even a decent inn. "No one in the world lives up there, my dear Duchess ! As for Avesnes, it's the dulllest hole. The Queen has arrived there, I'm told. Louis wants her to show herself to the natives, I understand. That will scarcely contribute to the gaiety of things, don't you agree ? " With all respect to an admirable sister-in-law and between themselves, Philip was thankful to be excused

from the family party. He didn't desire to seem a pessimist—but Avesnes—Holy Blue!

He was conscious of a trembling in the fingers resting on the zebra-striped sleeve. He had already observed how loosely the rings hung on them. The poor soul pecked at her food like a little bird. She was fretting over Louis, who didn't deserve that a nice woman should lose her appetite for him. Philip contemplated such sacrifice aghast.

"I thought perhaps you would advise me, Monsieur. You, who know the King better than anyone. Do you think it would vex him if I went? Do tell me frankly what your opinion is."

What a pathetic little creature! Philip, who like his father before him, had never taken a mistress and often wished he had never taken a wife, waxed sentimental over this neglected lady.

"Vex him, my dear? He'd be delighted I should say. Any man would be; only my brother, you know—you know, my brother——" Monsieur struggled between the Scylla of obvious evasion and the Charybdis of unpalatable truth. "Louis is a marvellous fellow for etiquette and having things just so and all that sort of thing. To tell you the truth, that's why I declined his invitation. Precedence is all very well—I have the highest regard for proper respect and all due deference—but what with Marshals and Generals and people, everyone sitting on top of everyone else—frankly, my dear Louise," Philip alighted on the name with delicate friendliness, "I fear I should find Louis exhausting *à tête* in a tent, or wherever he is; too much altogether, one might say."

Monsieur slung his cane by its scarlet ribbons and bringing out a fan from the folds of his sash unfurled and waved it languidly.

The girl laughed musically. "Ought I not to go? I am dying to go."

Driven for once to economize on words, he said, "Are you, my dear?"

Philip hoped he did not sound trite. He felt humiliated by his verbal infelicity. But she did not appear to notice it. Instead she managed to make him feel himself as she saw him. Not a short, too fat young man of effeminate dress and preposterous affectation, not a disappointed creature

concealing frustration with mockery, but one who had always shown her consideration, the near approach to the King, his brother ; a Prince incapable of deceit. Louis always spoke well of Philip ; since he trusted him, so did she.

"Of course you know best, Monsieur. I shall follow your advice, but I'm mighty lonely. Everyone else, almost everyone, seems to be going to see the King. I wouldn't go to Avesnes, of course, with the Queen there. I had thought of going straight to the camp—it's a few miles to the north, isn't it? I could return the next day. Would there be anything against that?"

Monsieur thought rapidly. The presence of the Mistress side by side with the Wife-Heiress in whose name this Flanders annexation had been launched, would be a political mistake. But Monsieur, who existed on scandal, wondered if there might not be another reason for the exclusion of Mme de la Vallière ; one which might also account for a desire so unusual in her to thrust herself forward. If that spiteful cat, Olympe de Soissons, was running round Paris spitting her venom, what she had hinted to Henriette might have reached the Rue de la Pompe. It was pretty sure to be a lie, an envious wish fostered by a malicious hope, but if there *should* be something in it?

Philip flattered himself he knew Louis inside out. He had never made the mistake of thinking the King would soon tire of hard work, would soon have had his fill of "that little Provincial." He knew what his elder brother was like once he took up anything—like a leech. Monsieur reviewed the persistence with which the love affair had been conducted. Mother, wife, the Church, set at nought, year after year ; and always a little more gained : the girl, hidden away at first, brought to Vincennes and St. Germain, taken about more and more openly and now created Duchess. Was it thinkable that Louis would discard his mistress just when he had overborne public opinion in recognizing her? It was not. But, certain childhood memories aiding, Philip also knew what his brother could be like when put in the wrong. If he saw this visit as an embarrassment, he might be furious ; but would he? It was quite probable that though he would not send for her he would jump at the chance of showing those strait-laced Spanish Dons that he could give their Marie-Thérèse their precious Flanders with

one hand and his Louise de la Vallière a Duchy in Lorraine with the other ! It was all in the picture, and quite a striking gesture if only he'd carry it off with some humour. But he wouldn't ; he'd do it without a smile ! " Our Sovereign will and pleasure, Our well-beloved Consort, Our well-beloved Louise de la Vallière and her infinity of rare perfections ! " Ponderous ass ! The disgusted Philip deplored the loss of such an opportunity to cut a figure before the whole of Europe.

But what to say to the little thing looking up at him so beseechingly ? It was thus that Philip saw the lady at least three inches taller than himself.

" He's lonely. He tells me so in every letter."

Monsieur's yellow-green countenance brightened.

" Why not write ? Put it to him ? One of my people can ride post for you. You could wait here for the reply. We should be enchanted, my wife and I."

" But if I write he may feel obliged to say No ! "

Her eyes laughed, ruefully—a laugh with which Philip sympathized. Prepare him ? Give him time ? Of course he'd say no. Take him by surprise, he might be annoyed, he might be pleased, he might be anything, but he couldn't say No. And it would damn well do Louis good not to be able to say No for once !

But what might that mean for Louise ? Louis couldn't send her back, but he could be confoundedly unpleasant in that cold, high and mighty way of his. The egoist, who took a joy in humiliating his wife, in scoring over his brother, found it positively painful to imagine Louise de la Vallière snubbed. He knew well how it felt to be made to look small by someone always a size too big for you.

So, though his eyes danced at the prospect of Louis unable to say No, in face of that appealing charm of trustfulness he compelled himself to utter a word of warning.

" He might disapprove, of course."

" But not for long. The King is never ill-humoured for long, is he ? "

Philip professed agreement. Certainly, if Louise had come a hundred and fifty miles on purpose to see him, he could not imagine himself keeping up a show of displeasure. He compromised with some good advice. As she had said, he understood his brother. " If he mounts his high horse "—he gesticulated skywards with the beribboned cane—" just

show him you don't care a toss, my dear. You just say, 'Very good, Louis, or your most Christian Majesty, or my little cabbage, or whatever you call him when you're *en famille*—well, I thought I'd give you a pleasant surprise, but if I'm mistaken I can go back the way I came. Monsieur will be delighted to have me at Mouchy. Good-bye, pleasant dreams, and round with the horses heads !' Of course you'll put it politely : the King's the King, but let him see *you* are *you* !" Pausing for his meed of laughter, Philip stressed his point. "Don't forget what I say. I know Louis inside and out. Threaten to show him a clean pair of heels. He can't bear to lose anything—you take me ?"

He made up his mind to a generous gesture. If she decided to go she had best make the journey in his new coach—more comfortable—plenty of conveniences ; the latest thing in coaches.

Henriette, though agreeing with her husband as to the efficacy of flight on Louis in a rage, doubted the ability of la Vallière to employ such a weapon.

"But she's done it before, with uncommon success."

"That was years ago when the affair was hot, *mon cher*. To-day it might give him a push in the other direction."

Philip's long, lazy brown eyes looked surprisingly troubled.

"Surely you don't credit what that sour-tongued woman said ?"

Languidly (she had supported Gabrielle for nearly two hours), Henriette gave it as her opinion that anything Olympe de Soissons put about would be three parts a lie. What she had said was very little, it was her manner.

"But what was it she actually said ?"

"What she said to you, pretty well. That the Montespan had made up a couplet about the new Duchess :

*"Quoi ! La belle ne va plus s'accoucher ?
On mangera maigre chez les Bouchers."*

He blew out his carmined lips. "Montespan ! That's ancient history. She's been angling for Louis for years. She tried her games on me first. She hasn't a chance, though : Louis detests clever women."

Henriette crossed herself—for luck, she said.

"I'm not superstitious, Philip, as you know, but when either of those creatures comes near me it makes my flesh creep—as if someone were walking over my grave, as we say in England."

Her husband ruminated over this outlandish saying. When next he spoke it was anxiously.

"Lou's not blind, far from it. He'd never succumb to that devil de Soissons with her dabbling in Black Magic, or to an adventuress like the Montespan either. I'd back Louise in the long run."

Henriette yawned. She had had enough of the subject and of Philip also. She took up her book.

"The worst of the long run," she observed wearily, her finger in a page, "is that it *is* a long run. And la Vallière, poor soul, has taken to limping lately."

Philip had not remarked it? How unobservant men were! Why, she had limped on and off ever since that last baby.

Marie-Thérèse was making the most of her opportunity. For once she held the stage. Hers the position of indispensable wife sharing by right the triumph of her lord. No aggravating Henriette to diminish her glory. "That hussy the King runs after" left safe at home; no one for once to steal her husband from her. Heaven was good to her at last. She determined to assist providential benevolence. Louis should be brought to be proud of her. He should be compelled to admit that a Spanish aristocrat can look as handsome, as modish, as any flighty Englishwoman, any French Provincial, in the world.

The great event was decreed for July 9, in the afternoon. The Sovereigns were to meet in ceremony and, greetings over, preside side by side at a grand review. The Queen prepared to please her Consort by an exact punctuality. Unable to sleep from excitement, she started on her toilet at daybreak. Dressers, manicurists, masseuses, hairdressers and Ladies-in-Waiting, all were pressed into service, La Borde, the sought-after beauty expert brought all the way from Paris, presiding.

They laced her and robed her, painted and blanched her; they rammed her fat little feet into five-inch-heeled shoes; they frizzed her sparse tow-coloured hair up to her be-

diamonded ears before sprinkling it with gold dust, and one and all fell into raptures at the final result.

Marie-Thérèse surveyed herself in the cheval glass. She twisted this way and that, demanded that the mirror be raised, lowered, turned to the light ; she debated the position of this brooch and that bow ; had them removed, brought back ; scolded, but always with dignity, one unintelligent attendant after another. Her Ladies-in-Waiting, perspiring in weighty full dress, made an admiring chorus.

Finally, after three mortal hours of it, her ladies almost besides themselves, she sat down with a sigh of relief. What a fatigue one's toilet was ! She fancied a cup of chocolate, and a wing of chicken perhaps. Maybe a few oysters would revive her. At the Escorial her Royal Father's physician always recommended a course of oysters for debility.

Certain of the ladies knelt ; one presented the chocolate, another the napkin, a third the silver platter with the succulent delicacy.

Athénâis de Montespan waved a fan to and fro : " Fatiguing, yes, Madame, but one must suffer to be beautiful."

This young, vital woman, the one person in the room unaffected by midsummer heat and heavy clothing, and being on her feet for hours without a rest, gave it as her respectful opinion that His Majesty would be enchanted. She surveyed the dwarfish, stout figure, loaded with trimmings like a Christmas tree, with a look of meek worship. " Only a Queen could do justice to such jewels ! "

Marie-Thérèse approved of this one of her women. The Montespan was well-mannered, of good family, knew her place ; a model wife with a baby every other year, she did all the proper things. Further Louis had once said of her, " Your Marquise fancies herself a wit—I dislike that kind of person."

" I think I do look passable to-day. What perfume would you suggest, ladies ? "

Madame de Montausier, the Superintendent of the Household, a conscientious soul, regretting the sight her Queen had made of herself, favoured a suspicion of violet or lavender, but the Marquise de Montespan ridiculed such old-fashioned taste. What about Eau-de-Miracle ? It was the latest perfume—made for Her Majesty, a noble essence. She had

a flask herself, unopened. If Her Majesty would condescend to accept the trifle.

The Montausier found herself obliged to look on helplessly while the favourite sprayed the Royal person with the contents of an elegant sprinkler. She wondered what the woman was about. Didn't everyone know the King's aversion to strong scents? But Marie-Thérèse was delighted and vowed her good Athénais had excellent taste.

Into this atmosphere of excited femininity stalked a conspicuous figure. Mademoiselle de Montpensier, the King's tall middle-aged cousin and the richest spinster in France, swept into the room. She was the only one of the Royal Family accompanying Marie-Thérèse. She came in striding like a man in spite of the yards of silver brocade hampering her long legs, with her weather-beaten face crudely rouged and her hair in the old-fashioned corkscrews and back-knot of her heyday fifteen years before.

"Madame de la Vallière has arrived!"

The roomful of women stared at this harbinger of ill-tidings. Everyone who dared said, "Never!" and "Impossible!" The lesser folk nudged each other and whispered. Marie-Thérèse, white under her paint and then redder than her paint, cried out:

"What! That girl here! I won't permit it—send her off! Send her off immediately!"

No one stirred. Mme de Montausier attempted to soothe her mistress; Mlle de Montpensier, centre of all eyes, shut her large mouth like a trap and stood grimly watching Marie-Thérèse develop a royal fit of hysterics.

The poor little woman, dignity lost in disappointment, oblivious of the effect on her fashionable complexion, wept and stormed. It was shameful! It was outrageous! She would not endure it. The creature must be sent away at once. She declined to take a step from the room until it was done. She did not care, the horses should be taken out, the escort dismissed, nobody should go if that disgraceful woman was to go too! Nobody could do anything with her.

"See what a state Her Majesty is in!"

"Surely the King did not send for her?"

"Let me entreat you, Madame!"

Over the murmur of respectful indignation rose a scandalized voice: "Heaven preserve me from being the King's

mistress, but if I were I should die of shame in presenting myself before Her Majesty ! ”

Marie-Thérèse pressed her Montespan's sympathetic hand. No one could say, she sobbed, that she had failed to make allowances. She knew how weak men were, even the best, and how that type of woman threw herself at them. But they should be kept in their place—a kept woman's place—not flaunting her shame, calling herself a Duchess. . . . She broke down and wept on the Montespan's convenient shoulder.

Mlle de Montpensier looked on contemptuously. She had no liking for la Vallière, little for Marie-Thérèse ; the one weakness of her heart was for Louis, the handsome cousin, twelve years her junior, who, by rights, should have been her husband, had not that dirty Mazarin prevented it in the days of the Fronde. She would not have Louis humiliated by these silly women.

“ If you take my advice, Madame, you will receive la Vallière. She's not likely to be presumptuous—she's been travelling all night, she and her sister-in-law, they're worn out. They've come from Mouchy in one of Monsieur's carriages. It seems they've had a rough journey, lost their road and were sent here by mistake.”

This intelligence provoked a new outburst from Marie-Thérèse. Mouchy ! Monsieur's carriage ! She might have known it. Henriette was at the bottom of this ! Receive the girl ? Never !

“ If she presumes to enter my presence, I go back to Paris, ladies. Send for Villacerf, someone, immediately.”

To the consternation of her *maître d'hôtel*, she issued commands :

“ That woman who has arrived—no one, I say *no one*, is to give her anything to eat. Not a thing—and no forage for the horses. You understand ? ”

The unhappy Villacerf bowed himself out backwards. Certainly, he understood, he even sympathized, but for nothing on earth would he have carried out such orders. Starve the lady the King had obviously sent for ?

He went in search of the unwelcome arrivals and found them sitting on their luggage in the entrance hall. The Royal favourite looked half dead with exhaustion—her eyes were closed and her head lay heavily against her companion's shoulder. The *maître d'hôtel* begged her to repose

herself in an adjacent chamber where refreshments could be brought. He professed himself full of sympathy. He prevaricated :

"There is no hurry, I do assure you. Her Majesty does not leave for some hours yet."

The sister-in-law answered. They had not intended to trouble Her Majesty—they had lost their road and eventually, misdirected by a peasant, had found themselves in Avesnes.

"We have not had a wink of sleep all night," Gabrielle de la Vallière ended piteously. "The jolting was terrible—it shook us to pieces."

M. de Villacerf thought they looked like it. Dresses crumpled and soiled, shoes mud-splashed, hair out of curl, like wax dolls left out in the rain.

Again he commiserated : "I advise a short rest upstairs, Mesdames."

Gabrielle welcomed the suggestion, but Louise would not hear of it. All she asked was a guide to conduct them to the camp.

The *maître d'hôtel* hastened to safeguard himself on both sides. He would be enchanted to assist Mme la Duchesse, but Her Majesty's orders were imperative. No one was to start before herself. As for a guide, there were only two routes to the King's Headquarters—the highway to be taken by the Queen's procession and the short cut across the fields. The going across the latter was very rough—"enough to shake the bones out of a man's body !"

M. de Villacerf added some more sympathetic compliments and left the inconvenient arrivals. He sent refreshments in to them and left matters to take their course. At least he had done his best to be agreeable to both parties.

They got Marie-Thérèse together at last. Fresh powder and paint, dry handkerchiefs, a stiff cordial ; endless protestations and flatteries. The unhappy, fat little creature set off eventually, half her pleasure killed, but relying on Villacerf's information that her rival was fast asleep somewhere upstairs.

The procession started in hot, sunny weather, though it had poured all the previous day and the roads were heavy going.

They started ; flags, troops, drums and bugles preceding the gorgeous gilt coaches in the first of which the heroine

of the occasion sat stiffly, Mlle de Montpensier by her side, Montausier, the Princesse de Bade and the favoured Montepan squashed in on the folding seats opposite.

Marie-Thérèse had begun to recover her composure a little when Athénais, looking through the window at a wide prospect of rough, churned-up ploughland, exclaimed incredulously :

"What's that over there? There—in the distance—over to the right? Is it? No, it can't be, if it is a short cut, no one would ever drive horses over those awful fields. Impossible !"

Incredulity also possessed Louis on receiving intelligence from the signallers that the Duke of Orléan's carriage had passed the outposts and was approaching rapidly. Impossible? Yes, for any reasonable being, but nothing was impossible for Philip once he took a freak into his head. It was infuriating—just like his exasperating brother to decline to accompany the Queen in the correct fashion and then to rush in on him without leave or warning in this preposterous style.

Louis, on horseback, had been about to start out at the head of a select company to meet his wife and conduct her to the Review of the Troops. Preparations were complete to the last detail; now there must be confusion and delay while place was made for the unwelcome arrival. Etiquette, paramount in Louis's view, would oblige him to ride side by side with that loquacious fool who, like as not, would emerge chirping out of the fantastic vehicle, now rushing towards him as if the devil were behind it, arrayed more like a peacock than the first Prince of the Blood.

Angry, ready with a caustic rebuke, he watched the offending coach dash in. An officer sprang to the door, and Louis caught a glimpse of occupants more unwelcome than even Philip.

Biting back an oath, he flung himself from his horse and stood covering the doorway.

"Good God, Louise! What are you doing here? Where's my brother?"

"He lent me his carriage. I'll explain"—a breathless voice. "We've come across the fields—from Avesnes."

"What! Before the Queen!"

A voice from the far side of the carriage deprecated

nervously, "My sister-in-law is sick, Sire. She has been suffering all night."

He turned on the nonentity. His voice froze. "Mme la Marquise de la Vallière, I believe? You will do me the favour to alight, Madame."

The unfortunate Gabrielle hesitated, then almost fell out of the carriage in her awkward acceptance of the terrifying hand. Trembling all over she landed in the mud, dragged skirts and flimsy high-heeled shoes, right in the midst of the officers and their horses. She was on the verge of tears, and not only for herself. She adored Louise, and hated to think of her shut up in the coach alone with the King in his black rage.

He had little to say. He spoke emphatically, but kept his voice low. He would not have believed it. What possessed her to come like this—to go to Avesnes of all places? The Queen would take it as a direct affront. She had placed him in an impossible position. The few bitter words ceased, the glance continued to condemn the girl shrinking from it on the opposite seat in her disarray and exhaustion.

"What have you to say?"

"Wait! I can't speak. You must give me a moment." She put her hands over her face.

"Can't speak? You had strength enough to undertake this preposterous journey, and you can't say a few words to explain it! I've no time for vapours. *Why* have you come? What is it? Quickly!"

From behind the hands crept an unhappy murmur.

"I thought you wouldn't mind. Monsieur said you'd be pleased. I was so unhappy—I couldn't endure it alone any longer. Dr. Boucher says I'm going to have another baby."

He made a sound. The jerked, impatient laugh made her skin prick. Her hands were pulled away. The face close to hers, heavily sunburnt and red with anger, was that of a stranger. The hard eyes travelled over her.

"When?"

"October or November, he said."

"October or November! You must have known before I left."

"I didn't—I wasn't sure. I couldn't believe it would be so soon again."

"Was it necessary to come one hundred and fifty miles to tell me this?"

Was it necessary ! What was necessary ? Her head span. What had someone said ? A kind voice : " A clean pair of heels ; show him you are *you*."

" It would appear," said that quiet, cruel voice, " that you are bent on killing this child also."

She caught her breath. " I'll go back. I'll go now—to Mouchy."

" My patience ! I'll have no more scandal. Have you *no* sense of dignity ? None of that, Louise !" He snatched her fingers from the door, he held them fast. " You've come for your own pleasure—now you'll stay for mine. I've to make the best of this exhibition. The Queen will be here in a few moments, she must not find you here." He pulled out his handkerchief. " Wipe your face, there's mud on it. Do you know what you look like ? Have you any idea ? Make yourself fit to be seen."

He did it for her, not roughly, not gently, but with exasperated competence. He pushed her hair under her hood, and found her gloves. She endured it all passively.

" I must go back. Monsieur said I could come back to Mouchy if you were angry."

He sighed his impatience. " Never mind what Monsieur said. You listen to what *I* say ! I shall send someone to take you to a place where you can rest and make your toilette. You will remain there till I send for you. You understand ?"

" I can't stay ! I must go back."

" Are you going to oblige me to have you watched ?"

He saw fear rush into the wild, beautiful eyes, darkening them. She looked demented, he thought ; the white, frantic face, the disordered hair, and soiled, creased dress. The sight repelled him. He felt desperate to get rid of her, not only before his wife should arrive, but lest any should comment on her disarray. Who could he trust to take charge of her and hold his tongue ? Seeing unconsciously the elegant upholstery of the coach, the quilted grey satin, the filigree silver holdings for wine and lamps and flowers, he became aware of the exotic scent which Philip favoured. He cursed his brother for his interference, but the resentment brought the recollection of another loan. He opened the window, beckoned and addressed the officer who hurried forward.

" Request M. le Général de Bellefonds to come to me."

The gentleman summoned must have been at hand. He presented himself in a moment and was bidden to enter the carriage.

A shortish man, he was yet unable to stand upright in the confined space and must perforce hold himself uncomfortably, shoulders bent, wig brushing the satin ceiling, the stiff skirts of his military coat catching against the seats on either hand. So placed, he could not easily look at the lady drooping on her side or at his Sovereign issuing rapid incisive instructions from his. He was, it seemed, to be favoured with a particular commission. Madame la Duchesse with whom the King believed he had the honour of an acquaintance, was to be confided to his care. Her sister-in-law, the Marquise de la Vallière, also. M. de Bellefonds was desired to escort these ladies to the farmhouse behind the lines, was relied upon to ensure their comfort and privacy. Persons already billeted there must be transferred elsewhere immediately—no intrusion of any kind was to be permitted. The ladies would be there until more suitable dispositions could be made. The Général would of course remain to protect Mme la Duchesse until relieved of his charge.

This intimate commission was issued in a cool imperative voice to the man already physically at a disadvantage; it changed completely when addressing the woman, lying back, eyes closed, as if withdrawn from the situation.

Bellefonds, taken aback, resentful of the peculiar errand, the peremptory tone, listened to a suave, solicitous exhortation.

"I cannot forgive myself for having caused you this fatigue, Madame. I am justly punished by the deprivation of your company at our gala this afternoon. I beg you to rest; do not in any way exert yourself further to-day. I leave you in good hands."

He lifted the hand lying slackly in her lap.

"Au revoir, dear Madame. Lie down, repose yourself. Till later!"

Alighting he motioned to the woman waiting outside to enter. In the slight confusion occasioned by this changing of seats, Bellefonds recovered his wits. He leaned from the window.

"One moment, Sire. Madame's carriage—I doubt if it can get to the farm. The track is excessively rough and narrow."

Louis's imperturbable face was completely unhelpful.

"This is not Madame's vehicle. She is without her own travelling coach. As you remark, this one is ill-suited. It would be regrettable if these ladies were further inconvenienced. I leave it to you to see that this does not occur."

He saluted the two women, replaced his plumed hat, gave directions to the footman hovering nervously at hand, and mounted the horse held for him. For a full moment he watched the ponderous conveyance lumber away, deriving a sour satisfaction from the idea of de Bellefonds at a loss, humiliated. That would teach him, sanctimonious bankrupt! Louise would get her carriage back now. He would not be so quick to borrow from her a second time, perhaps.

The sultry July breeze drifted northwards and past him. It brought the sound of music at a distance. He wiped his hot face and took stock of the position.

They were all as they had been before the news of the unwelcome arrival. The Commander—the Prince de Condé—rode at his side. The extraordinary incident might never have occurred for all the comment which reached him. The Prince did not venture, no one would ever venture, to express one iota of the curiosity Louis knew to be consuming those around him. Philip's coach, receding in full view of the company, might have been non-existent, but he imagined the raised eyebrows, the mouthed whispers, and maintaining an indifferent conversation with Condé, his affectation of composure hardened.

They proceeded slowly, Louis permitting himself an aside glance now and again. He thought angrily of the wife advancing, the sulks and jealousy he would have to placate, since at the moment it was essential that his relations with Marie-Thérèse should appear at their most amiable; more angrily of the woman in retreat. No black temper there, no noisy scenes, but God, what maddening inconsistency! Utter recklessness and prudish scruples side by side! Damn all women, was the text of his meditation.

As the road turned east he vouchsafed a last look. Stationary now, the coach was a small dark oblong in the distance. Some little figures moved away from it across the bare fields despoiled by the campaign. They were too far away to distinguish, but he imagined Louise supported by the man's

arm, leaning on it with her tall, languid grace. De Bellefonds he envisaged proceeding slowly and with care, selecting the smoothest going, concerned, solicitous. He no longer saw him as an inferior, manœuvred into an invidious position.

CHAPTER V

M. DE BELLEFOND's servant had ridden on in advance and, making short work of a party of subalterns refreshing themselves in the farm parlour, had warned the housewife to bestir herself. At the door of the square yellow-brick house its thatched roof overhanging little windows filled with tiny panes of bottle-glass, the big, red-cheeked Flemish woman waited to welcome the travellers. She had little French, but she made clear with smiles and gestures that everything was at the service of the ladies belonging to one of the foreign officer gentlemen, who *were* gentlemen, paying handsomely for all they used. She invited them inside to a flagged and raftered room, refreshingly cool after the shadeless heat outside.

Upstairs, the best bedchamber was made ready for the ladies' toilette. In no time an abundant meal was served to all; the servants in the kitchen, the ladies upstairs, and a tankard of cider in the parlour for the gentleman who had already dined. He spun it out, straining his ears for the light footsteps overhead, hoping she would descend.

It was an hour before he heard the old staircase creak and the rustle of skirts in the doorway. He saw her for the first time with her head uncovered. She was fairer than he had imagined; the women of his family were dark. The light, silken ringlets fell softly round her pale face, the disordered muddy gown was replaced by one of dull purple cloth, a lace scarf lay prettily over her bodice; no rouge, no finery. She is little more than a child, he thought as he rose.

"My sister-in-law is sleeping; she is tired out. We shall do very well here. You must not permit us to detain you longer, Monsieur. We have caused you sufficient trouble already."

A little awkwardly he replied that it was a pleasure. He could not think of leaving them unprotected. There were rough characters about.

She persisted, standing, as if awaiting his withdrawal, he thought.

"We are not afraid, and we have our menservants."

He became increasingly uncomfortable. Apparently she had not understood the orders he had received. Possibly she resented his presence.

"Madame, I will betake myself to the garden if you prefer."

At once she smiled. "I prefer you to remain here—my kind gaoler."

He flushed. "Madame, the office is not of my choosing. Forgive it."

The smile was a friendly one. "Why, I am thankful you were the chosen—no other"—she passed him, went over to the window seat and stood there looking out—"but we are not likely to run away—!" She broke off and, as he said nothing, turned round to him standing there behind her in the middle of the room.

She surveyed with a dawning attention the stiff, shortish figure; a cavalry man, bow-legged, his buff officer's coat, not very new, the silver gallon tarnished, the sky-blue scarf crossing its breast, the neat brown wig framing the concerned face.

"It will be dull for you, Monsieur. Pity you should miss the grand doings. There is to be a review, so we understood at Avesnes. Well, we must contrive to entertain each other; sit, if you please, and we will talk in comfort."

He bowed, came over to her, and stood looking down at her upturned face.

"Not but that you are in the right of it. If I could follow my inclination I should take to flight."

Her face displayed the ingenuous bravado of a child, delighted to astonish and defy.

The poor man could only murmur, "Madame!" Only cover his confusion by taking his place at the other end of the window seat and offering inconsequently:

"It is mighty hot to-day."

"But since I must stay here—stay and wait—" Without warning she bowed her face into her hands, smothering tears. M. de Bellefonds was shocked and completely disconcerted.

"Madame, I—— Is there anything I can do—you are fatigued, perhaps you wish to be alone," he stammered unhappily.

Wiping her eyes, but at ease in her distress, she murmured, "I should be sadder alone; one is lonely; I am glad to have fallen in with a friend."

He deprecated, "I have done nothing to merit the title. The kindness has been all on your side. I have not forgotten your goodness to that unfortunate, Verangeville. But, since you flatter me with the name, I suggest you prove me. You are troubled—your friend should help you."

Now she regarded him earnestly, the large dark blue eyes, still wet. He saw them as beautiful and pathetic.

"Why should I burden you with my troubles?"

"Because I beg you. Tell me as much—or as little—as you please. What do they say?" he attempted lightness. "Trouble shared is trouble halved."

She rested her head against the panelling of the window; against the old dark wood it contrasted pale and flowerlike, the languid neck emerging pearl-coloured above the deep purple bodice, the drooping shoulders, the white folded hands, made a picture of graceful, docile softness.

He looked, and knew then that he loved her. The revelation came calmly without shock or uncertainty. It was welcome; it warmed his heart. Yet, in its very sincerity, it weighed. The sense of responsibility was accentuated, and the appreciation of her need grew clearer in his mind.

She was, then, habitually unhappy. In the coach in Paris—in the coach at the camp; he suspected trouble there despite those smooth exhortations from the man calling himself her lover. He had never seen her face at peace.

She began in that gentle, pleading voice.

"I am unhappy to-day because I acted foolishly in coming here, and so displeased the King. The fault was mine; he did not bid me to come; he only inferred as much to spare me. He does all in his power to make me happy, but it is not always in his power."

He had the sensation of holding his breath in waiting for what she should say next.

"How can I be happy? Ever since this war started I have been tormented by fear lest he should die—be killed.

My remorse would be unending. He has no one to warn him—no one but me, and I am cowardly. So, we go on and I think, at times, I am killing his better self.”

His breath was released in a gasp of protest.

“You! You are a child. What are you? Twenty-two? Twenty-three? My God! He is a man, experienced beyond most men twice his age. The responsibility rests with him.”

She confronted his indignant face.

“I know it to be wrong. He does not. His will is as much his law as it is ours. In his strength lies his weakness. If you consider, it is natural it should be so. With me it is otherwise. I was not bred up to regard my pleasure as my right, and therefore am the more to blame.”

He cried out on this. Blame! Who could blame her? What man of sense, let alone charity. “You were a child when this began. Scarce seventeen, I believe—and he the King——” He concluded hotly, “When I think of it my blood boils!”

She put aside the warmth indulgently.

“He was only twenty-two himself. Because he is a King, may he not seek happiness? You know of his marriage—all know of it. What is there in it for such a man? Remember the tale of his first love. They did him an ill service who prevented him from honourably following his heart.”

“That is the lot of Princes, Madame. The price paid for a fortune men most envy and desire.”

Again that disarming smile. “We’ll not dispute it, we will blame no one. We will lay it to Fate. But how to change it? Will you believe me, though I rushed here all these miles from Versailles I would give the world to return in my tracks as fast as the horses could bear me away. That would solve my problem, maybe.”

A flush, mounting in her face, conveyed there an exaltation. There was nothing defeated about it now.

A sense of caution checked him. “Madame, are you in earnest? Do you in truth desire that I speak as I think? Would you care to hear my mind?”

As if in obedience to his mood, her expression sobered.

“Hear you say that I must break with him, as you must say, wrap it as you will. What else is there to say?”

He did not answer. The strange occasion, the strange

opportunity, the revelation of his heart, its urge to help impeded by his ignorance of her, overwhelmed him. His perplexed eyes surveyed the garden beyond the window ; a neat kitchen plot, vegetables planted in tidy rows, herbs and netted fruit bushes beyond, the whole enclosed from the trampled fields by a clipped briar hedge. The hot sunshine was trapped in it. The very birds piped drowsily, under the window bees droned above a bed of gillyflowers and stock. Beneath the porch, stretched out on the flags, a large rough sheepdog lay, tongue out and fast asleep, in company with a tiny curled-up black and white kitten. A place of homely, every-day peace ; and within, in the tranquillity of the cool raftered room, disturbing, unique—Romance. The love story of his day, his age. Romance among Romances for centuries to come—the tragedy, Romance !

His eyes must seek the mystery incarnate in her face, his thoughts could not leave it. Where was she going ? Where lay her true estate ? She should have been a contented wife and mother, the blessing of a home, but he could not picture the long, delicate fingers busied in womanly tasks, that sensitive, sensuous face as the Providence of children. Yet she was no woman of the world, no fortune-hunter ; he could only see her in one part—the beloved.

The musing voice was continuing. "Of course I must go. I know I shall go—first or last. What I have a mind to ask you is—How ?"

His mind recoiled before an incredible situation. Was it really he, a loyal partner in a conventional marriage, here in company with the King's Mistress, loving her, and she asking him how to leave *her* lover ? He gave no thought to any consequences to himself ; he could not see her as less than sincere. Even the moral aspect of her problem had faded out. All he saw was her young life laid in ruins ; it stared him in the face.

"Of course you must free yourself. There cannot be two opinions about it. What is there in this for you ? What peace, what security ? You, with all your life before you in which to find happiness. A way must be found. What of your family ?"

"My father is long dead. My mother has married again. They have other children to think of, and can do nothing for me."

He recalled some unfavourable reports circulating recently in respect of her brother's attitude to her elevation. Probably no help there either.

"What about a good priest? He would be bound to counsel you."

Her eyebrows lifted in gentle derision.

"Counsel? Yes, I have had their counsel. Every Easter it is the same thing; the thing I already know. Refrain from mortal sin. And the discouragement, the reserve, the other side of the grating, lest I should say a word too much. I go there hopeless. It is a mockery for me to confess at all."

He demurred, "Surely you cannot have made your situation plain. It is a Confessor's bounden duty——"

Her sigh seemed to waft a shadow across her face.

"How can I make it plain and yet withhold names? And if I so much as begin to say who is in question I am met by a checking fear. I can see the poor soul shrinking back, praying me, 'In pity do not bring me into this!' They do their part, but they are Confessors not Knights-Errant. They cannot find me the means of escape, and how should they? So I go back. Listen! When I met you on the doorstep of the Carmelites I had come there minded to go to Confession and at end of all my compelling myself, I found nothing. Nothing but a woman scrubbing a floor!" She shrugged. "So I went back with you, back to the place where he was waiting for me."

Her eyes, darkly reflective, seemed as if withdrawn at the bidding of the memory.

"Wait!" He spoke authoritatively. "The King then. What of the King? Have you put it to him frankly? Would he wish to keep you against your conscience? And if he would, he cannot compel you."

She pondered this. "My conscience! Is it like to be stronger when I speak with him than it is when we are apart? What brought me here to-day?"

His imagination kindled at the bidding of her words—"When I speak with him!" Certain scenes hastened to colour it.

Astute, experienced men, mature in age, able in their posts, Commanders, Diplomats—there had been an Envoy of the enemy among them. Here had been no intimate bond, no entire dependence to weaken them, their hearts

were not at stake, but he had marked them one after another go down under a Will. It had many aspects that Royal Will ; it could clothe itself with facility in sober common sense, in encouraging patience ; chill with silence, fascinate with winning graciousness. He held all the cards, the King ; power, means, perseverance, and, crowning advantage in any duel with this poor adversary, the key to the opponent's secret heart. How could it end in other than defeat for her ? He saw her leaning there discouraged, and he visioned her with her lover. Him he saw jealously, charming as he could charm on occasion ; bent on charm. His arms, binding that slender waist, would be stronger than fetters, his kisses would soon stifle the half-hearted protests of that sweet despondent mouth. He pictured, bitterly, the gladness of her surrender. But, rising above heart-burning, his fancy quested beyond. How could it end for her in other than disaster ? Louis would keep her, now and just so long as it pleased him to keep her ; once she ceased to please he would let her go. Her self-respect, no insignificant aspect of her salvation, lay in her own initial severance of the bond. His heart sank but he averred stoutly :

"No matter ! We will find a way."

As he said it he saw her relaxed body stiffen. She listened. A moment later he too caught the distant winding of a horn. Their glances encountered ; she rose to her feet, he followed. She looked across the garden, and he watched the strained expectation of her face.

They came in at a gallop. A bugler, preceding, demanded right of way. They reined in as one man, a dozen or more. It extended the length of the garden hedge, the file of scarlet feathered hats and sky blue coats and breastplates shining like silver in the sun. Horses' necks arched disdainfully, tossing up snow-white head-plumes as if vaunting the burden drawn, the light gilded carriage slung high above crimson wheels and glittering in the radiant heat as if itself made of sunshine. The apparition stretched above the dark briar hedge like a gayly coloured frieze.

Bellefonds was conscious of shock while identifying the details, the uniforms of the Maison du Roy, the fashionable town calèche which, despite its fragility, was sprung and admirably adapted to negotiate narrow tracks and difficult going if the journey were a short one. He recognized too, the spruce figure in blue and silver swaggering up the flagged

path between the vegetable beds as if the place belonged to him. The King's aide-de-camp, Maupertuis. He disliked the fellow on sight, much as Fouquet had disliked another man once on a time, on a Paris pavement and longed to kick a tool into the gutter.

"You see? He has sent for me."

He was the shorter by some two inches, but as they stood at the window, she relaxed against the panelling, hope and anxiety conflicting in her face, he erect, taut, as if holding himself in readiness, he appeared the taller of the two. When the officer had passed from sight and she sat down heavily, he still stood waiting the knock on the door. He waited for it as a danger; he heard it as a challenge.

She read her letter, he his orders. He had finished with the few curt lines in an instant and gave his attention to her face bent over the paper. It relaxed, became excited, warm, alive. She dismissed Maupertuis graciously, with an assurance Bellegonds had not yet seen in her.

"You see? I must go—to Avesnes."

"I see, Madame, that you are desired to go."

He spoke in a lowered tone with urgency. The coach she had lent him was at hand, equipped in readiness to travel, her own servants were here. This afforded an opportunity. "Take it, Madame, and return to Paris. Go straightway. What is to prevent you?" He continued as if answering an unspoken objection. "That letter? It can scarcely be a Royal command. It is not impossible to disregard an invitation."

"He is expecting me."

"No more than that!" It was as if he laughed. "And once in Paris take my advice. Go to my Aunt at the Carmelites—I will give you a letter for her. If they should deem it imprudent to give you hospitality they will find such for you. They have innumerable connections—in France and beyond. Persons who esteem conscience. Among them a present asylum can be found. You will have a good start. I shall detain this man till you are well away. The King is at Avesnes—what can he do? He cannot leave the Army. It is unthinkable that he will provoke the scandal of a pursuit. Go, go now, leave it to me. I will take the responsibility. I will speak to him; you have only to authorize me."

"You!" The word was incredulous. "You would do

that ! Do you know what such a thing would mean for you, for your career ? It would mean ruin ! ”

His voice held some stiffness. “ That is not a consideration, Madame. If you tell me that the company of Captain Maupertuis is unacceptable to you, it is not to be imagined that I should permit him to escort you to Avesnes or elsewhere.”

While he spoke and for a moment afterwards she remained at his side, and he thought, with hope, that she was considering his proposal ; then she moved, in silence, her purple skirts trailing on the red tiled and polished floor. At the door she turned.

“ I must go. Do not think too badly of me.”

“ Madame, give yourself time to think ! Why need you go ? Do not be afraid of him ! ”

He came to her side again, as if proximity might avail to hold her back.

“ I am not afraid of him. Not in the sense you mean. I am glad to go. Do not judge me too harshly.”

“ I do not judge you. I understand. But there are other things. Are you to go to Avesnes openly escorted by the King's own bodyguard ? In a calèche designed expressly for the use of the Queen ? Think of it ! A public affront to Her Majesty and a public dishonour to you.” He implored. “ Think of the future. How is all this to end ? Badly for you, I fear. Far wiser to break with it now ! ”

He said more in the same strain, but, although she stood, her hand on the latch now, in patience, waiting for him to finish, he recognized her hesitation as but a courtesy and perceived the strength of her weakness.

At last he stood back, but in his disappointment and the jealousy he as yet scarcely knew as such, he spoke bitterly.

“ You, yourself, know it. You said it must be first or last. Did you not mean what you said ? ”

She looked back into the room, but the far-away look was not for him nor for the window seat where she had sat with him and said it.

“ It is none the less true. But not to-day. I shall go at last. Can I help my gladness that it is not to-day ? ”

With an appearance of awakening to convention she curtseyed beautifully to him from the doorway.

"Good-bye, M. le Général. I am grateful, though I appear perverse. I understand all you would have risked for me. You are brave—and generous. I do not know who else would have offered it—no one in the world. Do not despise me ; forgive me, my friend !"

He told himself he would leave Maupertuis to arrange the departure. It was out of his hands. But he could not bring himself to stand aside. He gave her his arm to the gate, he took courteous farewell of Gabrielle ; he wrapped the light silken rug, sent with the calèche, round their knees, recognized it for Louis's who never forgot any detail. He spoke authoritatively to young Maupertuis as to the importance of careful progress over the fields. In all this he did not as much as encounter her eyes, but once they had started he stood watching the quick shining chariot till it was out of sight.

A sound behind recalled him. The Flemish woman, a broad smile on her broad face, addressed him. It was a moment before he comprehended her inquiry. The young officer had left without paying the reckoning. Was it to be included with the rest ? He had been of a thirst, that young officer, two bottles of the best finished here—four to take away with him !

In settling, Bellefonds thought wryly that a man who overlooked nothing had conceivably anticipated a strain on an impoverished purse.

The gold coach, the Royal guard, symbolized the reception awaiting her at Avesnes. She was received with high honours. All accepted her. Marie-Thérèse because she must and as ungraciously as she dared.

The next day when the King handed his mistress into the royal coach the Queen had seen to it that it was full already, but under Louis's implacable eyes the occupants must needs huddle together and make room.

Madame de la Vallière rode at his side to the torchlight rally, dined at the Royal table, accompanied the Queen to High Mass. She followed the armies, at times in the Queen's carriage, at times in her own, the guard of the monarch riding impartially by the door of each. The Flemish country folk asked one another whether His Holiness had given His Majesty a dispensation to have two wives at once.

The Court criticized nothing in a homage designed to please the King. But Louis was scarcely pleased ; he was increasingly conscious of the thing he most hated—failure. He observed Louise treading the round of festivities, reviews, balls and banquets, diffident, without conversation, often melancholy and fatigued. No matter what opportunities he made for her she remained aloof, an alien doing penance at a Jubilee. Her very beauty seemed under a cloud in competition with the brilliant, assured women around. He saw it, but, ruthless in refusal to admit defeat, he dragged her on in the wake of his triumph, in the depth of his heart an unacknowledged threat—the last chance.

At the end of a fortnight the rested troops were ready to march. The Queen prepared to return to Compiègne, and Louise was informed, kindly enough, that the travelling and excitement were obviously too much for her ; she must go home to Versailles and look after her health.

The night after her departure he sat alone and worked till four in the morning. Accommodation at Avesnes was cramped ; he had given up his room next to the Queen's to his cousin Montpensier who complained that her own was draughty. It suited both ; she was more comfortable, he further from his wife.

Louis was exhilarated at the prospect of the resumption of hostilities. Now the real business of life would recommence ; organization, conquest, negotiations, all leading to success. This campaign, of course, was only the prelude to the main enterprise—the eventual Partition, that diplomatic achievement conducted for him by Lionne ; the secret understanding with the Emperor whereby on the death of the King at Madrid, the Spanish Low Countries should be swept within the frontiers of France. Providential that only the diseased life of Marie-Thérèse's half imbecile step-brother stood between him and his ambition, the elimination of that vulnerable stretch in the wall of France, the oft-invaded Northern Boundary.

He regarded the Northern Provinces (the infant Dutch Republic) as a vassal dignified by the name of ally ; Charles Stuart as his poor relation pensioner—in his pocket. The Electors ? Not much to fear there ; Bavaria bought, the others busy squabbling among themselves. Sweden was still considerable, but her military consequence fast declining. He had taken the Emperor's measure ; in any case Leopold

had the Turk on his hands, whilst the Sultan also had his private understanding with a generous and most Christian King.

Europe, in the fine hot summer of 1667, appeared to Louis as a playground for a skilful player—for Ludovicus, the winner of the game.

Feminine intractability should be easily dealt with by the fortunate and the strong. Yet, as he sat hour after hour in the still, shadowed room, the lamplight a circle of brightness on his table scarcely revealing the mystery of the arched beams overhead, working conscientiously and with the intimate satisfaction of one at a cherished task, Louis was aggrieved to recall how his womenkind had failed him. He was sufficient unto himself, of course. In the full tide of vitality he woke each morning anew to the urge to put forth his strength ; a partner for his life was not essential but the lack of one was a loss. He hated to think of the poor figure his wife had made as Queen of a Conqueror, his Mistress as the Beauty of his choice. The one had used an ugly stiff-necked pride where a gracious ease was imperative, the other who should have worn her honours as a crown had drooped as though oppressed by an enforced glory. They had scarcely adorned his triumph.

Writing, annotating page after page, he told himself that resignation was the only attitude to adopt. He would omit both women from his future reckoning. Marie-Thérèse was the easier to dismiss. She could be relegated to where she belonged—to the Louvre, St. Germain, to her stuffy rooms, her tedious Spanish women ; to her cards, her endless meals and the inexhaustible business of the wardrobe. She had fulfilled the essentials of her office, given him an heir and the title to his Conquests present and to come. She had honoured her side of the bargain made by old Mazarin in his Treaty of the Pyrenees seven years ago. As for that other Pyrenees Contract made between an indifferent bridegroom and a happy, excited bride in the church of St. Jean de Luz, old Mazarin bestowing his blessing ? Louis conceded magnanimously, that one could not expect more from a woman nature had so meagrely endowed. He would do his duty, of course, pay her all outward respect, secure her material interests, but it was impossible to deny that she represented a sacrifice. Had Fate been kinder to him in the matter of marriage he would not have been forced to

an habitual irregularity, he, who only desired to live according to rule. He was not hard to please, he postulated it with sincerity, he could have made a success of marriage with any ordinarily attractive woman. He thought of Henriette, quick-witted and well-born, wasted on Philip, wasting herself on platonic meaningless love affairs ; of Marie Mancini (he remembered her as very intelligent as well as pretty), spending her life quarrelling with her Constable Colonna, a scandal to all Rome ; of Louise, who could have been so much to him, running wild for lack of a husband's proper control. He could have made a satisfactory wife out of any one of them, he reflected with complacent regret, checking, sealing his papers.

Louise was a greater problem than poor Marie-Thérèse. She was also more blameworthy. She possessed advantages denied to his wife. Intelligence, beauty, character, yet all these so poorly used that they availed her nothing. He had been at pains to provide her with an enviable position ; not his fault if she occupied it uneasily. He had made every allowance, been patience itself. Even this last piece of miserable folly, the journey to Avesnes, he had done his utmost to turn to her advantage. She compelled him to confess himself defeated.

Well, he would relinquish his hopes, his plans for Louise, he who detested the very name of failure. She also must go into the background, to retirement, insignificance ; Rue de la Pompe, Palais Brion, some such hiding-place. She could never be the woman to be proud of, but she would be there to revisit when he was so minded ; in some sort as a house loved in one's youth, but inadequate for the expansion of prosperous maturity.

But it was not always possible to regard Louise as the past when that past not infrequently rose up in her defence. Memories were still fragrant, at times a reproach. A daring young horsewoman in her sapphire blue, scorning him : "And they call *you* the First Gentleman in France !" A lovely companion in a moonlit garden, her head against his breast, guarding her sweet silence. Unfortunately, life moved on, one could not always stay boy and girl, love-making under the stars.

That was the trouble with poor Louise ; she had not grown up. Louis drew a curtain over what might have been had Louise been sensible as well as sweet and affec-

tionate. There were compensations ; delicious little Marie-Anne—there would be the coming child. Their mother (Louis congratulated himself on a clear conscience where justice was concerned) would always have a claim on him. She had disappointed him—supremely—but, thank God, he could pride himself on being no slave to his emotions ; he could put sentiment behind him and turn to more important matters.

He put aside the thought of her together with the despatch he was signing, locked the document away and turned to the next.

It was four o'clock when he had finished. The striking of the hour recalled him. A sedate, malicious reminder, each note deriding the next. The last was answered by a different sound. He rose calmly, surprised that anyone should be seeking him at that hour.

Outside in the passage, dark against the stone walls lit palcely by the breaking dawn, head and shoulders muffled in a black scarf, her face a whiteness, stood a woman.

CHAPTER VI

A triumphant beauty to show to all the Ambassadors."

Mme de Sévigné.

THEY celebrated the Peace in the grand manner, flaunting banners and a flourish of trumpets. The King came home to a popularity soaring sky-high. Abroad, his reputation was vastly enhanced, not merely because of two campaigns victoriously concluded—Flanders subjected town by town, Franche Comté taken in twenty-one days—but principally because of moderation skilfully timed, a diplomatic generosity. The King of France, the juridical claimant, the occupant by force of arms, had turned a benign ear to the representations of King Charles and Grand Pensionary De Witte. When more was in his grasp he had contented himself with less. "Exemplary humanity" extolled the panegyrists at home. "Ambition artfully and temporarily restrained" mistrusted uneasy diplomats abroad.

At least the Peace provided a breathing space. The Powers—suspicious Britain, nervous Holland and humiliated Spain—held conferences, talked, and, nothing decided, returned to domestic affairs.

Peace brought no respite to M. le Ministre Colbert, however. He toiled on, restocking arsenals, building new ships at fabulous speed, cutting his waterway across Languedoc, opening up ocean to ocean (it was unnatural, that—a thing to tempt Providence) and ever calling for more and more men. His working hours could not be lengthened—a man must sleep—but his temper grew shorter, his toothache chronic; he acquired a new, and to his wife a troubling, habit: he mocked, soberly and without humour, at religion.

There was a shadow on M. Colbert's horizon nowadays. The slim spectre of young Louvois, old le Tellier's heir, that alert Secretary for War, always at the King's elbow. Friendly with everyone who mattered, and some few who did not—surely did not? The Montespons, for instance, that high-born impecunious couple, M. le Marquis and his Athénais.

Paris had enjoyed no Carnival worthy the name with His Majesty at the front. Why expect the deserted earth to flower when abandoned by the Sun? hymned courtly Benserade. Louis, at end of a task well done, reckoning made, total presented for payment, was ready for play. Three days were allotted for festival. Thanksgiving at Nôtre Dame, homage to a favourable Providence; civic rejoicing, homage to Its deputy here below; and a superb fête to inaugurate the new Palace at Versailles. The last was not completed. It would take years yet to achieve the grandiose designs of Perrault and Le Nôtre, but the vast gardens, unfinished, were already a sight of beauty. Groves of trees, transplanted fully-grown from the forests of Normandy and Compiègne, and exotics from the South cast their deep shade over the lakes and lawns. Against the rich dark foliage statues of marble gleamed in frozen whiteness; bronze groups flashed fire in the July sun. Showers of pearly rain sprang from innumerable fountains. Perrault's marble colonnade, unfinished yet, swept in a noble arc about the lake-side, its columned beauty mirrored in the ornamental water. Banks of superb blossom overpowered with brilliance and perfume, whilst velvet, emerald, down to the canal stretched gardener Le Nôtre's green carpet. "Imagine the prodigies of rolling

and watering that produced such a miracle," extolled proud Frenchmen, not hitherto disciples of the lawn.

The hammering and sawing fell silent ; the chiselling and drilling of stone, the clanking of carts, the endless tramp of workmen, all the daylong clamour, ceased as if a spell had fallen on the building of Versailles. A serene order reigned. The weather, as kind to the King as fortune, stayed perfect. The sun shone all day, the south-west wind whispered. At night from a dark unclouded sky the moon at her full watched the fête with mild benevolence.

The village was packed and agitated. Where to bestow this influx of lodgers ? Not the artisans and labourers of yesterday, but a mob of gentry, the overflow of the Palace guests. Workers ceded their humble attics to their betters and camped in the open, and still there was not room.

The King having paternally decreed that the common folk should have their holiday no less, the high road to Paris was crammed down all its seven-mile length by an endless procession of carts and barrows, rank and file wedged in them or hurrying afoot. Fathers, mothers and their little ones, carried, pushed and led, all hoping to catch a glimpse of Wonderland : the magic fountains, the rockets spinning up to Heaven ; to gaze awestruck at the noble monsters in the Royal Menagerie, the giant elephants, the snarling tigers and lolling camels, birds of gorgeous plumage and strident cries, gifts of coal-black Emperors to magnificent France ; to file, hushed, into the Royal House (anyone of cleanly dress, however mean, might pass), to behold Majesty at dinner with right royal appetite. Above all to be caught up in a passion of loyalty upon their victorious Prince showing himself to them all from the balcony, in the midst of sky-blue flags and golden lilies. Greybeards, young folk, women and the babies they carried, he called them all, their splendid Louis, in that strong proud voice—"My children." It set their hearts aflame. True, bread was dear, if wages were passable and old skinflint Colbert taxed like the fiend, but they had the dirty Spaniards beat to a frazzle and a fine holiday for everyone. The hundreds of toilers at the end of their sweaty march footed it arm-in-arm on the stones under that sacrosanct window ; danced, cheered and sang the old songs of vineyards and rivers ; made merry and drank in sentiment like heady wine.

The three days' celebration was packed with splendours :

the *Te Deum*, the military procession through Paris ; the great shoot where the King's party accounted for five hundred brace of partridge in the Versailles plain, and all distributed to the sick and needy by Royal command ; the gorgeous mythological ballet followed by Molière's latest Comedy—*Georges Dandin*—a huge success with its irresistible theme of the cuckold husband ; the ball at which six hundred guests danced indefatigably. The climax was an Open-air supper for the privileged.

In a grove of limes five tables were set out ; for the Blood Royal, the Ambassadors, the Ministers of State, the Royal Households and a few of the highest nobility. Lamps of every colour hung from the dark branches above the tables, lights of every colour sparkled back at them from vessels of gold and silver and crystal, from pyramids of polished fruit and bouquets of perfumed, exquisite flowers.

King Louis presided from the centre horse-shoe table, his Queen at his right hand, his brother's wife at his left. Monsieur was aggrieved at being paired with that tedious old maid, the rich cousin Montpensier, the Prince de Condé satisfied to be next the Duchesse de la Vallière. The English Ambassador had place on the further side of the Royal Mistress ; he paid her marked attention, sparing a little of his courtliness to young Gabrielle de la Vallière, a nobody, as the diplomat knew, but worth cultivating since her presence testified to the influence which had included her in this exclusive company. Opposite Marquise Gabrielle sat another Englishman ; a youth in his 'teens with all the Stuart charm and surpassing Stuart beauty, King Charles's loved bastard, young Monmouth, disturbing guest of Monsieur and Madame at the Palais Royal. He could not take his dark, handsome eyes off the charming Aunt ; he leaned eagerly towards her, ignoring mute Gabrielle and the looks, black as thunder, with which Philip marked the moth and the candle.

Louis was in excellent humour. Ermine was massed over the back of his chair ; otherwise, in his purple damask, for ornaments his star and a diamond fastening some cream and crimson roses at the lace of his cravat, his was the soberest figure at that table of gorgeously attired men, flaunting their jewels, their glossy curls, their frothy laces, the élite of their day, superbly at ease. To-night he sat among them, the

dark complexioned, heavily-featured young man not quite thirty, the campaign sunburn still strong on his face, as the host, the master of the house, gracious, hospitable, listening with courtesy but sparing of words, knowing each to be garnered by the recipient as a priceless favour.

Philip regarded him enviously. Since the return from Flanders Monsieur had been aware of a change in his brother. Hitherto he had held himself aloof in general company, especially with women. He had been polite, no more. Now he began and maintained the conversation like any other man of the world. He contributed an occasional good story, had an indulgent smile for dubious anecdotes at which he would have frowned at one time. Philip scarcely relished this change; he could not welcome a rival in the one field left to him.

Maric-Thérèse was looking passable to-night, decided the husband, with a critical eye for cloth-of-gold netted thickly over emerald green. Too many ornaments, of course, but her hair dressed becomingly for once. If only she would not make such a business of eating. To enjoy a good dinner was one thing, but if he yielded to the annoyance, he could distinctly hear those mouthfuls relished to the last crumb.

"My father's chief physician always laid it down that complete mastication is essential to health. . . ." He lost the context; in a slight hush he picked it up again. ". . . Yes, twenty-five times. He was an unimpeachable authority," she ended enthusiastically.

Henriette had a pretty taste in dress. Charming, that pale blue satin, cut very full and embroidered in a deeper blue, a few pearls, the thin shoulders concealed by rosy gauze. But she was really emaciated, poor child, her bones were showing through her skin.

He bent his head to her entertaining nonsense for a moment. A wit proper in a woman, no blue-stocking pretensions, not too acid. She could be a Princess and a charming woman at the same time. A presentable sister-in-law and a useful one, with her influence with slippery King Charles and her devotion to himself. Pity she and Philip did not get on. It was inevitable they should disagree, but such flagrant domestic discord was undignified—a discredit to the Blood Royal and therefore to himself. Louis told himself he also could have spent his days sparring with his wife had common sense not informed him that one must

make the best of a *mésalliance*. Philip, so much more fortunately wived, was incapable of such philosophy. He remarked with disapproval how his brother fidgeted at the side of their rich spinster cousin, not troubling to hide his boredom ; how he scowled at the youth Monmouth, openly snubbing him; not troubling to hide his ridiculous jealousy. Now, as ever, a law to himself and of no sort of use to his brother. Yet in his fashion Philip *was* beginning to settle down. He was putting on flesh if Henriette were losing it, the beginnings of a paunch, to his secret despair and Louis's private teasing. The Duke of Orléans might in time subside into a satisfactory little figure of a Prince, but he would never make a man of mark in the domain of politics or war. Just as well, perhaps, in the square field of France where there was no room for two husbandmen.

Louise ? Louis's eyes arrived at Louise, left her. They travelled to the side table where a gay, laughing crowd, the Queen's ladies were relegated, and rested on the Marquise de Montespan. Yes, she was incontestably the finest woman present. The head, crested with red-gold curls, poppies wreathed in them, sprang like Pride itself above the superb shoulders rejecting a bodice daringly low even for the *décolletée* of the day. She could carry off dead white like a girl of seventeen. Her cheeks, her lips, so glowed with health that it was impossible to be sure if she rouged or not ; her pose as she turned to the man next her was instinct with vitality. She was twenty-eight and in the full bloom of her sumptuous beauty. She had reason to be proud of it, and she was.

Louis surveyed this abounding loveliness with appreciation. A perfection among the perfections of nature and art he had amassed for his Versailles. She adorned his feast like a fruitful goddess. Ambassadors would write home about her, "The Marquise de Montespan, one of the finest women in Europe, certainly the wittiest and best dressed at Court. Much courted, yet of a spotless reputation. No one can boast of her favours." Louis smiled at the imagined encomiums, smiled as at a secret jest.

She had entered his life suddenly. Not that he had been unaware of her attempts to attract his notice for the past year or so, or of her previous angling for Philip. She had not interested him. He met her frequently in attendance on Marie-Thérèse and had been rather repelled than other-

wise by her mordant wit and by the knowledge that his wife approved of her.

She had appeared, amazingly, outside his door that early morning at Avesnes. The morning after Louise had left, the day on which Marie-Thérèse was to depart also. His wife had sent her with a message; she had remarked his light still burning and trusted he did not ail—an improbable solicitude from the sleepy Marie-Thérèse at four in the morning!

He had disbelieved the woman standing there with a smile on the face framed by her dark shawl. Few men would have misunderstood that smile. It would have attracted many, repelled some, scared a few; him it chiefly challenged. Despite his age and opportunities he had no experience in casual intrigue. He had worked unremittingly these past seven years of early manhood; his love affair had sufficed the emotional side of his life. On that night, Louise gone, he displeased with her, he had dismissed Montespan with a polite answer for his wife, then, re-entering the room, had tossed over his shoulder, for her to take or ignore, "Come back, if you wish to."

An insolence. When she returned, slipping in at the door left just ajar, noiseless in her velvet shoes and dark chamber robe, he more than half regretted. He spoke gravely now:

"I rather expected you'd think better of it. You run risks lightly. You'd be ruined if anyone saw you."

"If you call it ruin, *I* should be proud of it."

He had been taken aback by the glib audacity. It spurred him to a further contempt. How much would the woman stand? This so-called virtuous wife and mother, the daughter of a ducal house, correct attendant approved by Marie-Thérèse.

"I make no doubt you know what you're about. But I'll warn you—it'll be no manner of use later to tell me you're with child."

"There is convenience in a husband."

To-day a year later, he had not forgotten the way she said it. Negligently, with a touch of humour, but above all as an expression of cool common sense. It was illustrated in the deliberate care with which she folded her robe and placed it on a nearby chair. The achieved composure woke in him a sense of immaturity. Urged to conceal it, to impress her on her own ground, he affected to take indifferently

the extraordinary apparition in his quiet businesslike room—the ivory limbs, firm contours, the superb hair bound round the statuesque head, the whole as unrelated to reality as a marble Ceres sprung to life, and almost as undesired.

"It's mighty kind of you to take pity on my solitude, but perhaps you've the habit of charity, my dear."

She had daunted him anew with that inflexible unconcern.

"Believe me or not, Sir, no man has ever moved me before." Now she regarded him earnestly. "But you're fatal to me. I had to come."

There was no coquetry in her voice, no passion, a powerful sincerity. It flattered him. Disappointed and lonely, he was in a mood to take what she offered. At first because gratification lay there to hand without much risk or trouble. He saw her with simple covetousness, but the nearness of that beautiful flesh, insolent and unashamed, communicated a relief to him. It swelled, swamping the habit of caution and control. To fling off dignity and measure, the cramping burden carried for years. To be oneself—a brute. Yet the unprecedented surrender of a cherished pride reproached and humbled and something in her words jarred on him; he made a last profession of dissatisfaction.

"Fatal! I take exception to that. Those pretty feet brought you here to-night—not fate, my dear."

But he found it impossible to offend Athénâis. She was invariably good-humoured with an invulnerable, insensitive cheerfulness. Also, extraordinarily diverting. His prejudice against her wit disappeared on discovering it to consist mainly of salaciousness of the less coarse kind, or mimicry of persons with pious eccentricities. The obvious kind of quip Louis could appreciate, but which Philip had declared did not do Montespan justice. She was accommodating, too; she had no shame and made it flatteringly clear that to her even this secret, casual intrigue was high honour. It was for his sake she must be careful. She went to endless trouble in discretion if he sent for her. Although furiously in love with him she didn't take it amiss that he ignored her in public, never wrote to her. As for the husband, Louis, whose conscience had not pricked when Marie-Thérèse only was in question, had entertained scruples concerning the Marquis de Montespan, but since Athénâis had given

him her version of her husband's character, his gambling, his dissipation of their strained resources, his neglect of home and wife and children, his violent temper and so on, he had ceased to waste compunction. Instead he anticipated the day when a wastrel, enlightened, should attempt some form of blackmail. He would know how to deal with that, thought Louis grimly.

Meanwhile, it was gratifying to find that the woman who had gone to all lengths to attract his notice ranked as the leading beauty of the day ; that half a dozen connoisseurs in femininity were fighting for her favour.

Above all she had one great merit. It was not necessary to behave to her with respect, as with his wife, to play the part of honourable, faithful lover, as with Louise. He could descend from the pedestal with Athénais ; nothing shocked her ; for long, now, this had ceased to shock him. Yes, Athénais was looking very handsome to-night ; a woman to be proud of, were it only secretly. His eyes returned to the horse-shoe table. Louise. That silver lace gown, shot through with rose, harmonized with her fragile beauty. She looked ephemeral, sitting there in the moonlight which paled the sparkle of candles and coloured lamps, pendant like ripe fruit in the dark branches. Fairylike, the ash-blond curls, the delicate colouring and sweet remote face. Not striking like Athénais, one might easily overlook her, but with an attraction of her own. Poor little soul, how distressed she would be if she knew ! He was always at a loss to conceive how Louise would take the revelation that, for a year past, he had entertained a second mistress. She would probably make far more to-do than the totally neglected Marie-Thérèse. He imagined her running off somewhere, giving him endless trouble. He would hate her to be hurt ; she was so fond of him, his Louise, and he had a sincere affection for her—always would have. He caught her eyes as she sat there listening with gentle patience to old Condé making a bore of himself. He raised his finger to his lips and kissed them towards her.

Louise, patient with Condé, indulgent with Monsieur itching for attention, preserved her thoughts for Louis. She had done her best to please him on this grand occasion. It had been something of an ordeal. The Prince, Monsieur, and two ambassadors to entertain ; but she had not been

unduly nervous and now, at the close of the evening, she felt something of a success.

She had seen little of Louis all the year past. First one campaign, then a second, but he had written regularly if briefly and unemotionally. At times the prosaic tone of his letters had disappointed her, but she had reminded herself that after all one could not expect the same ardour from a great Monarch at thirty as from a boy of twenty-two, and was reassured by the remembrance of his solicitude last Autumn when their little son was born. Madame Colbert had accepted this baby also, two children were now thriving in her nursery in Paris.

Taken all round life had been easier, more tranquil, for months past. The problem of the Queen less omnipresent. With Louis largely abroad, Louise's attendance at the Palais had been formal and infrequent. How would it be now the war was at an end? Marie-Thérèse must have observed that gesture of caress. It was wrong, but she could not help being glad of it.

Louise abandoned an insoluble problem; she had begun to put self-reproach on the Queen's account behind her. Life would be unendurable if one should always worry, and life with Louis home again was going to enter on a new lease of happiness.

From time to time she looked at him, the centre, the symbol of all this jubilation. The Chief, the Conqueror, the adored through length and breadth of his rejoicing kingdom. Fine in moderation, in the generosity which had sent thousands of humble prisoners back to their homes without ransom. The Arbiter of Europe they had called him at Aix, that sun-burned, hook-nosed man, presiding hospitably among his guests; but to her—lover, heaven-on-earth. Who was she to be so incredibly chosen? She blushed like a young betrothed on receiving that wafted kiss, a signal between themselves, but a confession before the world. Her heart sprang in grateful love. She was proud, at last, proud to be his. Once this interminable banquet should be over she would claim him.

She found her opportunity at midnight. He approached her in the throng gathered to watch the illuminations. Startling in the dark leafy night, Palace, terraces and colonnade were outlined in unearthly fire. Rockets shot starwards

in showers of many coloured rain, flushing Louise's silver skirts to rose. For a few moments they stood together, watching the magic scene. She spoke softly and he pressed her hand.

"Impossible to-night, my sweet. I shall be up till day-break. These Fêtes encroach upon my working-hours." He smiled at the downcast face. "It's months since we were together? It's months too long for me. You lie at the Palace to-night: suppose you come to me? Come by the backstairs—I shall be enchanted." His eyes laughed at the quick flush. "Come, I want you to come!" The eyes sobered. "You can't find the courage? Poor Louise!" He stroked the hand he held. "Ah well, my loss! To-morrow then. Rue de la Pompe—agreed? Do you invite me to supper?"

Supper! She would make him a feast!

"Expect me at eight. We'll celebrate all to ourselves. Good-bye, my Dream of the Moonlight. Silver is your colour, not a doubt of it. Good-bye, sleep well."

But she could not sleep. The strange room, excitement and fatigue made her restless. After a couple of hours she left her bed in despair. From the window she looked down on the dim prospect of lawns and avenues, from which the night was stealing drearily, wrapped in mist. The garden fires were all extinguished now; trees emerged, disconsolate shades, and through the timid dawn a wing of the unfinished building rose gaunt and monstrous, a raggedness in stone. Here and there a light showed, though it was nearly five. She thought of Louis working through the remainder of the night. He must be weary after his long day.

"Suppose you come to me instead . . ."

Not a soul was abroad in the silent passages save one or two sentries who recognized and saluted her.

She remembered the backstairs. She had entered that way four years ago when he had lain sick, so seriously that in London he had been given out for dead. He had raved of her in his delirium, asked for her again and again. Laporte, the kind old valet, had taken it upon himself to bring her privately to the bedside. Poor Laporte, red-eyed for his master, very respectful to the agitated young lady he had escorted up that retired entry. They had changed much at Versailles since then, smothered with great arrogant buildings the pretty rose-brick château where Louis had

brought her for many a happy holiday, but the hidden door, the little homely staircase, were so far untouched.

It was not kindly old Laporte to-night : he was in his grave these two years past. Another valet, Bontemps, of the plump cherubic face and crimped flaxen wig, reposed in Laporte's big, winged arm-chair in the old-fashioned, low-ceilinged anteroom. The cold light revealed him—yellow head against a cushion, the pouting red lips dropped open, fast asleep. On the thick thighs straining the chocolate satin breeches lay a small white kitten, its rhythmic purr the only sound in the secluded room. The innocent blue eyes observed the woman passing with indifferent content. She hurried by quietly, but with an assurance which had come to her at last on this midsummer dawn, seven years almost to the day since the young lovers had first come together on another July night, the assurance of the beloved who knows that her advent will delight.

She opened a door softly, drew back the heavy velvet portière with precaution, intent on giving her surprise, and the first thing she saw in the shadowed room beyond was the face of the woman in his arms.

No ! The word was much more than a denial. It was a wall against mortal disaster, a reprieve from the decree of death, a companion for the flight across unseen country, past buildings which were not and obliterated gardens.

She ran, unconscious of everything around. If any spoke she did not hear. The postern to which she fled instinctively, the guard, the word which opened the gate, were for ever unremembered ; the streets, the pavement of the Rue de la Pompe, the entrance into the house, the curious eyes of servants, for ever unrecorded on the brain fixed in the mould of rejection. No !

She paced her room, clutching denial like a shield. Stiffing her consciousness with it, pressing a blanket over a smouldering fire.

A face first pierced her stupor. It appeared in the far corner of the room : a vignette, tiny, clear, frightening. She brushed her hand across her eyes, repelling imagination. It vanished, only to appear anew, dancing in on the edge of her vision. Again she brushed away the sick fancy, closing her eyes until, impelled to look again, there it was, un-

defeated, larger, plainer. A wicked face dancing, dancing in the corner of her room.

Teeth clenched, eyes shut tight, she strained her whole body against it till the blood sang in her head : but the horror persisted. Behind her closed lids it was there, spinning, retreating, advancing. Not a vision of flesh and blood, not a beautiful woman's face, triumphant under the crown of red-gold hair ; it was sly, obscene, unnatural, a caricature of a human face ; a skull.

She despaired. Her nostrils dilated at a stench. It was leaping nearer now, hideous, carrying putrefaction.

"The Powers of Darkness !" The far-away ejaculation was her own terrified voice. What was about her ? Was she out of the body and this haunted place her coffin ? Pray ? Too late for a guilty soul, sin upon sin stifling it. She wrenched her rigid lips apart, her voice issued in an attenuated whisper, a sigh against a shout—a tremendous shout, a ferocity overfilling the Universe. The floor seemed to rock beneath her feet, the walls to bulge inwards ; beyond the insane confusion she perceived the three long windows, daylight bright in them, rippling in movement like a reflection seen through water. The white lace curtains billowed, as if engaging in a Devil's dance.

Sickness overwhelmed her, the retching left her perspiring, exhausted, too weak to resist the gyrating phantom circling ever nearer. A greater horror roused her last strength, a breath, hot and putrid on her cheek, a touch on her breast. Hands ? Talons ! She looked down and thought she saw them as grey, reptilian, covered with speckled scales. Her clamped lips sprang apart. She screamed, and Madame Colbert, running in, thought she would never stop.

The coldness on her forehead was delicious ; it trickled refreshingly over her wrists. A clock was striking. A kind voice. Madame Colbert was asking if she felt better now.

Too exhausted to answer, or even to open her eyes she burst into tears. The motherly voice comforted :

"It's all right, my dear ; I'm by you. Don't cry ; it was only a dream."

She wept on weakly. Not for her tragedy : that was subordinated to thankfulness that the terror was but a nightmare. She lay relaxed in gratitude for deliverance, aware of the real desolation but able, obliged, to postpone its

contemplation ; to drowse and think of nothing but relief.

She woke again to the shaded coolness of the room. To familiar objects. Her toilet table in its dainty petticoats of sprigged lawn over rose taffetas, the gilt and rose brocade chairs, the long windows wide to the summer afternoon with the green and white awnings over them. The portrait of little Marie-Anne in its silver oval, pink cheeks and engaging baby smile facing the pastel of Louis, a dark profile, smiling slightly and inscrutably from the opposite wall.

The clock again. Six. He would be here at eight.

The cruel truth must be faced. The certitude of life—that by which she had had her being for seven years had departed, leaving nothing, no one, to take its place. The entirety of her loss held her passive. There was nothing to be done, nothing to hope for, to trust in, no one to whom to turn. Her doom was a sentence inevitable and deserved. God had held His hand for long, but now her hour had struck. In a hopelessness restful in its completeness she lay supine, aware of Madame Colbert and her maid moving quietly from time to time, drawing the sunblinds, spraying the room with aromatic water, sponging her face again, offering her drink and asking how she did now.

Madame Colbert was concerned, but not unduly. Hearing screams she had hastened to the bedchamber, helped the maid to raise her unconscious mistress, administered restoratives and summoned the physician. But since the good man declared that Madame's distemper appeared to be a swoon following on some fright or shock, that there was no fever and the pulse only a little rapid, she resigned herself to watch by the patient now sleeping quietly,

M. Colbert, making kind inquiries from time to time, was more perturbed than his wife. The man whose business it was to know everyone's business had a tolerably accurate suspicion of what was wrong with Mme de la Vallière. Indeed he participated in her trouble ; it had given him several uneasy hours in the past few months. To do him justice, his own concern that a new influence should challenge that of his protégée, included a sympathy rare in an unsympathetic man. "Poor woman, it's really too bad !" was how he phrased it to himself, peeping in cautiously at the bedchamber door ; a heavy fallow face interrogating the silent bed.

But she must not be encouraged to make too much of it. She must take good advice, the position could probably be retrieved if handled sensibly.

He beckoned his wife outside for a few words. But Geneviève had no idea as to the cause of this malady. Madame had said nothing ; nothing of how she came to return home alone at that extraordinary hour, nothing at all ; only cried a little when she first came to herself, and wanted to lie still and sleep.

Her husband looked at her sideways.

"She hasn't had a tiff with the King, eh ? "

Madame rebuked the uncomfortable question with a forthright blush. Never could she feel easy concerning Jean-Baptiste's attitude to the situation which had brought so much prosperity to their family.

"Not so far as I know. But she wouldn't say : she never tells me anything like that."

M. Colbert nodded his bullet head, "Maybe another baby on the way ? "

He spoke with a hopefulness which his spouse, guardian of the half-Royal nursery, resented. She knew nothing at all. But there was one odd thing : she spoke unwillingly, it displeased her to discuss Louise de la Vallière with her husband, but the habit of the confiding wife still asserted itself.

"I hope she's not in commerce with undesirable persons. I found something to-day when I was putting her things to rights—I can't sit still and do nothing like some folk. Wait ! I'll bring it."

She returned with a folded handkerchief.

"Look at this." She opened it carefully and M. Colbert saw a tiny white silk bag enclosing a pear-shaped morsel of something resembling dry cheese. A scarlet thread lay embedded in it like a vein. His thick forefinger prodded it gingerly.

"Wax ! "

"It's meant to be a heart"—the lady's tone conveyed disgust. "It's one of those cheap amulet things : the sort of rubbish serving-girls buy at fairs. The silly creatures believe if it melts their love prospers, if it cracks it means a broken heart. This one is cracked. I don't know what that bit of red cotton is supposed to be—blood, I shouldn't wonder. It's sinful nonsense, of course. So uneducated ! "

"Eh, what's that? Where did you say you found it?"

"Stitched into her bodice—the gown she wore at the Fête last night, Tucked in under a seam. You might have looked a dozen times and not seen it. I *was* surprised: aren't you?"

If M. Colbert was surprised he did not show it. He held the dainty handkerchief to his nose, sniffing it leisurely before replacing the rubbish or whatever it was in the little silk sheath. He bestowed both in his pocket-book without comment. The handkerchief he passed back to his wife.

"Best get it washed," he advised. "Who launders such things? The chamberwoman? That's a new face. Where did you get her?"

Madame Colbert told him—defensively.

"She's had no hand in such a thing, I'm sure of that. Des Œillets is very respectable and an excellent maid. Madame de Noailles spoke most highly of her. She was with her for nearly five years, you know. Her sister has been first waiting-woman with the Thianges for ages, that's a recommendation in itself. The most modish house in Paris: everything in the best style."

"Hum!" M. Colbert said no more. A year ago he would have reminded his wife that Diane de Thianges was Athénâïs de Montespan's elder sister, and that Athénâïs de Montespan—

To-day he merely grunted, "Hum!" before advising her to keep an eye on the newcomer. "After all, one never knows!"

At the King's arrival, the patient having slept for hours and looking almost herself again, Mme Colbert saw no reason why the august and familiar visitor should not be received. Louise's attitude disconcerted her.

"Tell him you are unable to see him? No more than that? But, my dear, I can hardly do that. I must have a proper excuse for His Majesty."

Her eyes protested against the quiet obstinacy which she recognized as the forerunner of embarrassments.

"My maid can take my message."

That would never do, of course. An impossible disrespect. Jean-Baptiste was right. They *had* fallen out. Reluctantly, she went down to the drawing-room, returning in a few moments with pink cheeks. His Majesty was greatly con-

cerned to hear of the Duchess's indisposition. He regretted she did not feel equal to descending : he begged leave to come up.

Louise appeared to consider. She looked about her thoughtfully. She took so long over her answer that Madame Colbert had time to wonder again what the quarrel had been about : they had seemed on the best of terms at the Fête last night.

"Not here. No, I will go down if I must."

She threw back the bed-cover, swung thin feet to the floor and caught up a dressing-gown lying over a chair. Madame's shocked voice recalled her :

"You're not going down like that, surely, dear Madame Louise ?" Her expression rebuked the unseemliness of a crumpled muslin *négligée*, undressed hair and a washed-out face. "Sit down a moment. I'll find a fresh *Indienne* if you don't wish to dress. You would wish to brush your hair, perhaps ?" She hoped the obvious suggestion did not appear too pointed.

"Let me be for a moment, pray Madame."

Rebuffed, mystified, the woman withdrew, to collide at the door with her husband. He put her aside unceremoniously, walking into a lady's bedroom without so much as a by-your-leave. Propriety and curiosity combined to make her turn back.

"Madame will pardon the liberty." An uncomfortable voice, but she knew that dogged expression. Her husband, edging clumsily into the room, was clearing his throat.

"May I just have a word ? I'm afraid you've been a trifle upset, my dear Madame Louise, but don't take it to heart—don't exaggerate things. Take the advice of a man old enough to be your father——" Stopping his advance, M. Colbert made a gesture familiar to his family, the elevation of a stubby, admonitory forefinger. Then, as if thinking better of it, left the hand with clenched fingers at large in the air, like an abandoned threat, while the anxious guttural voice pleaded with the woman standing quite still before him with her loosened hair and unfastened dressing-gown. He regarded the abstracted face searchingly.

"You'll excuse plain speaking from an old friend, I hope ?" He coughed again, the hand descended awkwardly, as if ashamed of itself. "But you know me : I'm not a

courtier. Take my advice—don't use reproaches. Men hate scences—I do myself. Be kind—cheerful—*ig-nore* it ! ”

He intoned the two syllables with equal weighty emphasis. An ingratiating smile, incongruous on the heavy disapproving face followed.

“ That's the card to play, my dear lady. I'm your good friend—if I may call myself so. Your interests are mine—always have been. I've knocked about the world, and a bitter place it is sometimes. But we've all got our duty to do, as I'm sure a lady like yourself knows better than anybody. And yours is to *ig-nore* it. It doesn't mean much—men are all alike, even the best of them. It'll pass ; you take it from me—it's sure to pass if you act sensibly.”

He paused on a little gasp, came nearer to her by another few steps, shuffled his feet, and, repeating that discordant smile, murmured unctuously :

“ If I may make so bold, look your best. Let my wife help you. Go down handsomely ; be kind to him.”

Geneviève averted her eyes. She was revolted. The tone even more than the words carried conviction. Not only as to what had befallen Louise de la Vallière, but what had befallen Jean-Baptiste. Listening to that husky wheedling, the last of the wife's sympathy went down to its grave. She gave no thought to how the other woman might regard an offensive intrusion upon her intimate concerns. She was blind to the picture of her husband as he sincerely saw himself ; an honest servant struggling to perform a disagreeable duty in the best interests of all concerned. She saw him as a man mean and conscienceless, lost to all honour and even common decency. She averted her eyes and despised him from the botton of her heart.

The broad shallow stairway, the shining brass of the balustrade wound up aloft to regions of mystery. Below the hall was full of silence. The tall doors panelled in cream and gold stood closed around it like discreet sentinels.

She descended slowly. Behind her the hem of her gown, a froth of flowery muslin, fell reluctantly from stair to stair.

Beyond the repugnance to his entrance into her bedroom, she had formed no decision. M. Colbert's earnest admonitions had passed her by. She had nothing prepared, not so much as a word rehearsed. She went because she must. She did not wonder in what manner this prelude to her

Passion would be ushered in—if by traitor's kiss, coward's denial or the indifferent washing of hands. She descended slowly, but outside the door beyond which he waited, she remembered that other door and stood a moment clasping the lintel, overcome by the racing of her sick heart.

CHAPTER VII

"After having given you the whole of my youth."

*(Letter of Louise de la Vallière to
Louis XIV, February, 1671.)*

IN the summer of 1670 Bernard de Bellefonds, now Marshal of France, was despatched to London on a mission of importance. Few envied him this mark of his Sovereign's trust. The expression of King Louis's condolence on the tragic death of the Duchess of Orléans was no mere compliment. It comprised genuine sympathy in a mutual bereavement and the prime determination to maintain diplomatic relations unimpaired, but the envoy's immediate business was to remove a brother's passionate suspicion.

Henriette Stuart, newly returned in triumph from her visit to England, that gay visit to her beloved brother masking as important political negotiation, had been struck down by the agony of a single night. The circumstances were sinister. Her husband's well-known jealousy, his undisguised antagonism to her journey, the presence of one of his despicable favourites, the Chevalier d'Effiat in the Palace of St. Cloud where she met her end, the extraordinary interference of this contemptible person with her drinking-cup, the sudden violent pain after a drink of chicory water: each detail pointed to unnatural death.

Poison! The ominous word swelled from a whisper to a shout. Rumours muttered in Paris were cried aloud in London, the name "Monseer" flung into the gutter at Whitehall. This vicious little Frenchman had poisoned his unfortunate wife with that decoction of chicory. Prince or no, such crime must not go unpunished. In that hour of boiling indignation it appeared that the darling wish of

Minette's heart, her last achievement—the alliance between Charles and Louis must be sacrificed to avenge her.

The King of France did all in his power to avert such a catastrophe. He commanded a stringent investigation, a post-mortem at which six eminent physicians were present—three English and three French. He assured the English Ambassador that were his brother indeed guilty, no question of rank or kinship should protect him. Then, when the total absence of serious evidence had cleared the unhappy Philip in all impartial minds, Louis, who had never for one moment doubted his brother, set to work to rebuild his threatened diplomacy and despatched a special embassy to London.

Many wondered at the choice of Ambassador. Such a task demanded exceptional qualities—tact, forbearance, and above all, insight into the minds of others. Bellefonds, a gallant and experienced officer, had given no signal proof of such. But Louis, famous throughout Europe for his choice of instruments, had not erred. His Maréchal's sincerity, a lack of exaggeration most un-Gallic, stood him in good stead in the private cabinet of Charles Stuart. Profoundly disapproving of Philip of Orléans's mode of life, his worthless associates, his treatment of his wife, Bellefonds knew the weak frustrated man fundamentally incapable of such a crime. He conveyed conviction to the man he was sent to convince.

Towards the beginning of winter the envoy returned to Paris, as successful as poor Henriette had been in that happy summer past. He carried with him the esteem of Charles II and his assurance that Minette's secret treaty of Dover would be honoured.

In company with the Marshal on his journey home travelled a young Scotsman, Mr. Smith of Rotherhithe, revisiting the French capital for the first time in ten years. Mr. Smith, like his Sovereign, approved of Bellefonds: an honest fellow, too good for a Frenchie—a gentleman, in fact.

Mr. Smith was delighted to become the Marshal's guest in an immense shabby Hôtel in the Rue des Ours. A visitor must be entertained. Bellefonds did the honours of the Capital. The gentlemen visited the theatre in company, rode together, dined out once or twice and, at Mr. Smith's request, his host obtained for him admission to the last event of the winter season—the Shrove Tuesday ball at the Tuileries.

The ten years intervening since a young and bashful Scotsman had sung ballads to the gay circle of an English Princess at Fontainebleau had brought changes. Mr. Smith, married man of seven years' standing now, possessed besides a comfortable, well-dowered spouse and three healthy children, a good post in the Customs and a rotundity below the waistline.

He retained a sentimental memory of the Grand Tour of his salad days, and entered the French Palace with a secret eagerness to hark back to carefree youth and one-and-twenty.

He was disappointed at changes he found there. Maybe the absence of King Charles's charming sister was the cause. He was conscious of a constraint. There were no impromptu songs to-night, no jolly games in a ring on the floor. Everything was magnificent: never had he seen such superb furnishings, such costumes and jewels, but the splendid courtiers seemed to move to order, to speak in formulas. The rigid etiquette oppressed. The dances executed to perfection were pompous, the music lacked spontaneity; the very love-song of a Florentine professional was heartless—an artificial compliment.

Encountering old friends, Mr. Smith met disappointment here also. Could that heavily-wigged courtier with his graduated bows and his ceremonious compliments really be the hot young spark Brienne who had called him to account over nothing in this very drawing-room? Was the substantial middle-aged gentleman impecunious Langlée, the sharp-witted blade who had rooked him of his last louis d'or at the officers' card table at the Palais Royal?

As for the ladies, Mr. Smith knew of course that the young beauty, Tonnay-Charente, had become the famous Madame de Montespan, but he would never have recognized the Maid of Honour in the goddess in cloth of gold, a fortune of jewels round her person. He remembered that Mlle Tonnay-Charente had once been pleased to let him kiss her behind a curtain and felt the taller for this recollection.

"Is the other lady present?" He brought out a little joke. "The lady past, perhaps I should say!"

This harmless play on words evoked no smile from his host. M. de Bellefonds inquired gravely whether Mr. Smith had the honour of an acquaintance with Madame la Duchesse de la Vallière.

"Lord bless you, Sir, I used to play parlour games with her on this very floor. Charming girl; we were the best of friends." The Scot was glad to refer to acquaintances who, if no longer at the top of the tree, were still proof of one's own social standing. "I saw a good deal of the La Vallières. I'd like to meet Madame again. Is she here to-night, Sir?"

"Madame de la Vallière is seated at the left of the dais," de Bellefonds tone was dry.

Mr. Smith looked. He failed to identify his Sylvia of Fontainebleau in the woman in violet taffetas sitting alone. He would not have recognized her. Well, ten years was ten years, and of course children aged a woman. There had been four, hadn't there? Eyecing the lady he would not have recognized, Mr. Smith remarked that she looked a trifle lonely.

"I'd esteem a word with her. D'you think I might venture, my dear Maréchal? You know her, I take it?"

"I have that privilege." The soldier spoke gravely, but he made no objection to accompanying his guest across the crowded *salon* to the solitary figure.

Mr. Smith made his best bow. M. de Bellefonds kissed an extended hand. The lady smiled at the introduction. But certainly, she recalled perfectly! Her thin, oval face flushed at the little succession of complimentary memories, "Charming Sylvia! I love my love with an L!" She agreed that those were pleasant days. M. de Bellefonds cut short these felicitous reminiscences by a description of last night's play, so trite and lengthy that the Scotsman ceased to listen, preferring to watch the interesting lady who gave the dull fellow the whole of her attention.

Before Bellefonds had finished, Royalty was announced. The company rose. Mr. Smith observed that his host took the lady's arm as the Royal party entered in grand procession.

More changes. The once slim dandy, Duc d'Orléans, that glass of fashion, was now a fat little man in the conventional mourning of a Royal widower, stuck up on four-inch heels like stilts, a black wig erected high above a yellow, nervous face. The deferential hush was pierced by an agitated staccato:

"Black's such tedious wear, my dear Cousin. Stifling; heating to the blood."

Mr. Smith eyed Monsieur with curious disgust. The

partner towering above him, the grenadier Princess Montpensier, had changed less than most : one couldn't forget a face like that. Queen Marie-Thérèse was plainer than ever, and the tip of her cocked-up nose as red as a cherry. Not a patch on that dainty little monkey-faced woman, his Queen Catherine at home. As for the man escorting her—Mr. Smith remembered the French King as an energetic, rather awkward young man, not bad-looking but with a repelling manner. This was a majestic personage, entering slowly, head held high, the eye of a master for the bowing, curtsying room. The thrusting features were stronger than Mr. Smith recalled them, the nose curving down like an eagle's beak, the smile beneath a perfunctory painting on the humourless face.

The King seated his Consort with ceremony, bowed to her and to the accompanying princesses, and made his way to the group in the centre of which the Marquise de Montespan stood waiting with sparkling eyes and a proud welcoming smile. The King occupied a settee with his mistress ; her arm in his, she leaned against him. Conversation broke out with a buzz of release and everyone sat down.

The Scotsman was not a whit shocked by this display of royal marital infidelity. Whitehall afforded the spectacle daily—with a difference. When King Charles petted Frances Stewart or his ageing Castlemaine in public, it was carelessly : the frank jollity of a man at ease and at home. His Cousin of France supported his Mistress's superb bare shoulder against his sleeve, like a statue in bronze, the hard, dark eyes fixed straight ahead : no appearance of complacency or gallantry, just an ostentation of things as he chose them to be. Mr. Smith did not know what to make of the man.

The Royal Mistress interested him vastly. He had heard of her as gloriously triumphant ; an adept in mockery ; deferentially insolent to the Queen, friendly insolent to her dethroned rival, the inoffensive la Vallière ; forcing her company on both when it pleased her.

Rumour was rather contemptuous of the Duchess. Her attitude under defeat was peculiar. She had made no scenes, accepted the position with a complete lack of dignity. The King was said to preserve a milk-and-water friendship for her, to visit her apartments from habit. The three-

cornered situation gave rise to sarcasms. In Olympe de Soissons' drawing-room they sang :

*" On dit que La Vallière
S'en va sur son déclin,
Que ce n'est que par manière
Que le Roy suit son train."*

The Crushed Violet, they called her, and Madame Modesty. She over-acted the rôle, however. If truth were told she was making a purse for herself : she was well paid to stay the official Mistress, protecting the Marquise's reputation at the expense of her own. She was the Montespan's chaperone *vis-à-vis* her outraged husband.

All this amusing gossip had crossed the Channel. But to-night at sight of the much discussed lady ignored by the brilliant assembly crowding around her supplanter, Mr. Smith, forsaking the standards of humour acquired in the Customs Office, saw nothing to laugh about. These Frenchmen were a pack of time-serving curs.

He regarded Louise de la Vallière conversing softly with Bellefonds. A pretty, wistful creature : more to his taste than the other, though it was small wonder she had lost the game against the flaunting rival opposite who, using her eyes, her fan, her rich contralto voice and the stolid royal lover beside her, paraded her conquest before wife, old love and all the world.

She rose, haughtily languorous, as the King quitted her to open the ball with the Princesse de Bade. She disdained to curtsy ; her cool "A bientôt alors," reached across the room.

The King led out his partner. Mr. Smith heard his host inquire if Madame de la Vallière cared to dance. She did not ; she remained standing by his side, etiquette requiring that all stood while Royalty danced, whilst couple after couple took the floor, and Mme de Montespan swayed by in company with a stout blond man in orange velvet. The Marquise flashed a smile at the trio with special notice of the stranger.

"Not dancing, my dear Duchess ? I trust the poor foot is not inconveniencing you to-night ? La, M. de Bellefonds ! Our great diplomat unable to overcome a lady's modesty ? "

The orange velvet cavalier sniggered obsequiously. The

word "modesty" was echoed in a man's affected voice as the pair danced on and a titter arose. The Scotsman's hand found his sword hilt.

"Who is that mannerless fellow?"

His indignation was checked by her quiet, soothing voice.

"It's my brother."

He relapsed into confused apology and mystified silence.

The music blared, the dancers postured ceremoniously, and King Louis escorted his princess back to the royal fauteuils. He stood for a moment between her and his wife, picked up his little black and white spaniel "Malice" under his arm, and surveyed his assembled Court with an air of proprietorship.

Mr. Smith observed with curiosity this outstanding figure of his day. Louis the Great they were beginning to call him—it would be on the coinage shortly. Undisputed Lord of once-divided France, the turbulent nobility were not less beneath his footstool than the humblest peasant. The master of the greatest armies, the richest revenues in Europe was served by a galaxy of talent. There were no diplomatists to equal d'Estrees and Lionne, no Ministers like Colbert and Louvois, no Generals to compare with Turenne and the great Condé, that arch-rebel of the Fronde now proud to call himself his Cousin's loyal servant. Vauban, Molière, Racine, Bossuet, all spent their diverse genius for his glorification. He knew how to make himself loved as well as feared, and Frenchmen kissed the hand which ruled in no uncertain fashion. "Whilst," wrote the Venetian Ambassador, "the ambition of every woman of rank is to become the King's Mistress, and they declare this could not offend their fathers, husbands, or Almighty God Himself." He was fast approaching the inhuman isolation of divinity, this man of thirty-three who had once cowered on his bed, a terrified child, before the Paris mob. He had wrought so intensely in his country and for her that he had assimilated her, body and spirit. He was to sum up in his single person her glory and her weakness: he stood for France.

"I don't see what there is to make such a pothor about!" protested Mr. Smith insincerely. "A lot of silly exaggeration: just the same at bottom as any other man, I'll swear."

But he found it difficult to imagine that dominant figure in the ordinary relations of humanity, as husband, father, lover. An old story came back to him. A young fellow,

Royalty forgotten, riding breakneck through Paris streets in pursuit of his lost love. His glance left the haughty master for the woman in her humiliating abandonment. In all this fickle crowd only the middle-aged Bellefonds to keep her in countenance—a man who, it was apparent, was smitten by the discarded charms.

Mr. Smith was roused from reverie by an imperious voice. The Montespan was holding forth to her circle on the subject of True Love. Was there, in truth, any enduring fidelity to be found in these degenerate times?

The worshippers protested. What a question from one who ruled all hearts! François de la Vallière went one better: he recited some couplets of his own composition, "Homage to Venus-Athénais!" Mr. Smith found these high-flown gallantries fulsome; he glanced to see how his grave host was taking them, but the Maréchal had no eyes for any save his companion.

The elaborate argument proceeded. Languidly on the Montespan's part, but at the return of the King her animation revived. With an air of flattering deference she appealed for His Majesty's opinion—his verdict, she would rather say.

Majesty, dog under arm, sublimely unconscious that irony might well lurk beneath such inquiry, deigned no pronouncement. As for poems on this subject: "Some verses were sent to me some time back. I do not profess to be a judge of such matters, but they struck me as having merit. The conclusion remains in my memory. It summarizes one aspect of your subject very aptly."

Amidst the deferential hush, he quoted in a formal unfeeling voice:

*"L'Amour, à qui je dois et mon bien et mon mal,
Que ne lui donniez vous un cœur comme le mien?
Ou que n'avez vous pas fait le mien comme les autres?"*

"We have there the inevitable divergence of human nature; Inequality, Disunion and the consequent impossibility of permanence in affairs of the heart."

He spoke without a smile even for the radiant face affecting reproach.

"Oh Sir, what cruelty! And who may one inquire is the melancholy author?"

"The verses are anonymous."

The woman smiled brilliantly. "Quel dommage ! But one may perhaps speculate ? Let me think." A jewelled, tapering finger mimed consideration against a creamy-white forehead. "The poet is nameless, therefore modest ; but the work has engaged Your Majesty's attention, therefore one might declare modest to a fault. The lordly sex is rarely so retiring—I'll swear a lady. The sentiment is heartbroken, maybe a trifle jealous." She threw out her arms in a gesture of mock perplexity and ended amidst appreciative titters of laughter, "Modest, heartbroken, jealous : who, I ask, can the lady be ?"

A movement. Heads turned. Louise de la Vallière, pushing off de Bellefonds' detaining arm, was making her way towards the door. She did not get far. The King rose suddenly and stalked with weighty dignity after the retreating figure. A frigid voice summoned. "I desire a word with you, Madame."

She stopped. Mr. Smith glimpsed a burning face as Louis, possessing himself of the arm of his former Mistress, led her, undisguisedly reluctant, apart.

Alone of the astonished spectators the foreigner appeared openly curious. De Bellefonds maintained apparent unconcern. The Scot wondered what was passing between the pair. The woman's flushed face was lowered ; the man regarded it stolidly. Suddenly the King released her arm and raised his own. Was he about to strike her, the brute ? He did something only less incredible. Deliberately he tossed the little dog into her arms.

"Malice is fit company for you, Madame !" He turned on his heel, leaving her stock still, the snapping animal scrambling against her breast.

Mr. Smith was dumbfounded. Gracious Heaven, what a scene !

It was over in a moment. She gave a little cry, and disengaging the indignant spaniel from her gown placed it upon the floor. The bundle of black-and-white sulkiness shook itself, gave a last petulant bark and pattered after its retreating master. Into the hush of the stupefied audience cut a high, drawling voice :

"Malice and the Duchess have nothing in common. Sensible beast, he harks back to where he belongs !"

Philip of Orléans, even the tamed Philip of to-day, was a

privileged being. No one else would have dared let fly a barb at the Majesty of France. Mr. Smith was conscious of a stir of admiration for the unpleasant little Frenchman who at least had ventured to champion a lost cause. Monsieur, his word said, sauntered off to the card table, leaving Louis, apparently unconscious of his brother's gibe, to resume his seat by his Mistress, who took the little animal in her white jewelled arms and made much of him.

Mr. Smith, intent on the couple, missed the exit of the heroine of this strange scene. When he looked round Madame de la Vallière had vanished—de Bellefonds also.

The Scotsman, on his return to London, often recounted this singular incident. His listeners were interested to learn that the French King, that mighty, legendary figure, was in reality nothing better than a sour-tempered man of uncouth manners.

The sound of music and laughter reached her where she sat by the dying fire in her apartment in the Tuileries, waiting for the hour when Bellefonds should take her away.

She had acquiesced in all the arrangements he had suggested. The Convent of the Visitation at Chaillot. To meet him at six o'clock at an obscure door leading on to the Place du Carrousel. No one to be forewarned, not even her maid.

Her preparations were few. Even so, they were more elaborate than on that flight to another Chaillot Convent ten years ago. Then the girl of seventeen had fled out into the midnight of Paris in her ball-dress and satin slippers; M. Fouquet's ear-rings for all wealth, for baggage her little packet of love letters.

Now she spent the remaining hours of the night in sorting letters, burning the most part. From her wardrobe she selected a few garments, changed her ball-dress for a grey woollen—the plainest she possessed, and when all was done sat down by the fire to compose her farewell.

She addressed her faithless lover in the formal phraseology of the lettered :

I should have left long before having lost the honour of your good grace, had I been able to dispense myself from seeing you. This weakness has been so strong that even now it is all I can do to subdue it, but at last I am persuaded that, having given you the whole of my youth, it

is not too much to devote the remainder of my life to God."

She addressed the letter "For the King, by the hand of M. le Maréchal de Bellefonds," and sat on by the hearth in the wan illumination of the embers, shivering now and again as the warmth died out and the charred log crumbled to white ash.

She glanced about her. These rooms had no haunting memories, but they were full of the gifts of happier days. His portrait over the mantelpiece, an arrogant bust on a pedestal between the windows, the inlaid casket of ivory and silver containing the pearls he had given her three years ago when their little son was born—and he was even then false to her. She drew off the ring he had set on her finger those years gone by at the happy woodside picnic, when betrayal would have seemed even more incredible than the sweet, secret adventure. She laid it beside the pearls and gazed down upon both—the first gift and the last, lying side by side on the ivory satin bed.

If, at twenty-seven, Louise de la Vallière had acquired so much forethought as to provide herself with a change of chemise for her second flight, it followed essentially the pattern of the first. The night, secrecy, a Convent. All worldly gifts were left to the donor since they had lost their value in ceasing to be the gifts of a lover. Other details she left to her one friend, and waiting by the dead fire for the hour appointed, her musing was all of the past, devoid of anticipation or anxiety.

When at last the clock struck, she rose, took up her wrap, her small valise, and went noiselessly to the door. From it she looked back. "I have nothing that is not from him—joy and anguish, good fortune and ill, every possession—the very bread I eat." Her eyes rested on a painting of her children: twins, they looked, in the long stiff brocade frocks, the dainty lace bonnets. Like Louis, both of them in the dark curls, dark eyes and rosy faces. "My heart should break to leave you. Of what am I made that you mean so little to me?"

The man who loved her waited at the agreed place; she entered his carriage and drove away with him.

The Convent of the Visitation, a spacious, well-appointed

country mansion, stood in extensive gardens at the bottom of Chaillot Hill. It was an aristocratic establishment with little in common with the humble sisterhood higher up the slope. The Convent's first benefactress had been the late Queen-Mother of England. Here the unfortunate Madame Henriette had received her education. The former Superior had been that interesting Louise de la Fayette, whose virtuous charms had captured the chill heart of Louis XIII; the Reverend Mother of to-day was of English descent, a niece of King Charles the Martyr, and many high-born ladies, English and French, wore the habit under her tolerant rule.

The principal activity of the Congregation was the maintenance of an aristocratic boarding-school, but it offered besides a comfortable retreat to a few select worldlings seeking a refuge from the cares inseparable from devotion to the World, the Flesh and the Devil. The boarders were ladies of quality who paid fittingly for the pleasant apartments, the excellent cooking, and the serene existence amidst charming surroundings.

"One is apt to forget that it is not only the poor who need charity," the Royal Superioress was wont to admonish her daughters.

No little homely figure of a lay-sister pattered to the door to admit this early arrival; the stately bronze gates were set wide by a respectful porter in livery. Within, the expected guest was made heartily welcome. Reverend Mother herself waited to kiss the Duchess on both cheeks before confiding her to the care of Mère Lucie of the ducal house of d'Estrées, who, certain that Madame must be mortally chill, escorted her above-stairs to one of the finest apartments. Chintz curtains, delicate pink against the white painted walls, shut out the grey February dawn. Shaded wax-lights shone softly either side the hearth, where a blazing fire of apple logs filled the comfortable room with warmth and perfume.

The good Mother expatiated on the merits of M. le Maréchal, now tactfully departed for Paris. A pious, noble soul—how sad he should have lost that dear lady, his wife. "We are so glad he brought you to us, dear Madame."

Mère Lucie possessed the kindly match-making propensity of the contented celibate. Her descent from that monarch

of liberal amours, Henry IV, prompted her to a sympathy for Louise de la Vallière. In this interesting successor to her grandmother—the charming Gabrielle of ballad—she found it easy to love the sinner whilst deploring the sin. She beheld in this guest a valiant penitent who, fleeing the very real temptations of a royal lover and life at a glittering Court, might find salvation in the way of Holy Matrimony and make that good man Bellefonds happy, over and above.

She hovered round Louise with motherly solicitude. She must rest after her journey, she looked weary. The bed was well aired, the warming pan had only just been taken from the sheets. Madame positively must partake of this hot spiced Claret, Sister Cook's speciality. Mère d'Estrees persuaded the guest to lie down, covered her warmly, said "God bless you, dear Child; confide yourself to the care of the Holy Angels, and try and sleep," and descended to the Chapel to offer her Ash Wednesday Mass for the intentions of the pious widower, Bernard de Bellefonds, the good estate of Louise de la Vallière, and the conversion of that Royal sinner, Louis, the adored King and cousin.

Louise was thankful to be left alone, but she could not sleep. The overwrought brain roved incessantly. The inevitable end which had overshadowed her life with Louis had come to pass. In the early years it had appeared an unreal, remote misfortune like the advent of essential death. Later it had assumed the terror of possibility, to be repulsed at all costs. She had pictured her tragedy under several aspects: his death, his infidelity, the demands of his conscience or her own, but always as a wrench, a swift agony. It had come otherwise. Two and a half years of drawn-out suffering, neglect, indifference, humiliation increasing to last night's public insult, had brought her to this unpremeditated withdrawal. She had broken with the past and no one would be over-concerned.

In ten years at Court she had made few friends. "If you had desired that we should weep with you, you should have shared your joy with us"—the opportunist Duc de Montausier had made it clear. Her brother, who owed his fortune to her, professed himself the Montespan's fervent admirer. She had offended Colbert in ignoring his advice. Her children looked to Colbert's wife as to a mother. No one would miss her except Louis, a little and for a little

while. She refused to ask herself how he would take her fight, the past must be put away as a finished book, the key lost to the manuscript called Memory.

But, restless on the comfortable bed, it was not memory, sweet or bitter, which possessed her. The present moment, the tranquil room seemed to have no reality ; she felt herself, a traveller, lying in a wayside inn, halted, but tense, waiting to journey on.

Waiting had entered her life hand in hand with love. In the little secluded Brion she had spent empty day after empty day longing for nightfall and the arrival of Louis. During their first real separation when he was besieging Marsal, the girl of nineteen, hiding as best she could the advent of their first child, had endured the lonely weeks in constant anticipation of the love letters, pages at a time, which he had sent her under cover of Colbert. At the Tuileries, St. Cloud, no matter where, always the woman must await the hard-working indefatigable man on whose convenience and pleasure everyone waited. In the Rue de la Pompe, concealment a thing of the past, expectation still inhabited the fine home of the King's acknowledged Mistress. But there it brooded—a suspense. It lay in wait for her by the bright fire where she sat straining her ears for the winding of bugles, in the window-seat where she leaned out to catch the first gleam of the blue and silver courier posting from cruel Flanders with munificent gifts and ever scantier letters. Waiting for the best, the worst, but always waiting for this day.

Henceforth the agitation of life would cease. Time would pass in ordered procession. Mass, reading, needlework, strolls round the pleasant convent grounds, chats with the kindly nuns and lady residents—one of their number, to be waited on, cosseted. A foreign existence for one who had lived vehemently, exploring the whole range of a supreme emotion before she was twenty-five.

To Louis she had written of devoting the rest of her life to God. She saw this as her only road henceforth. But devotion is a science : where should an ignorant acquire instruction in a better school than the holy house dedicated to the service of religion, far removed from sin and its occasions, jealousy, despair and the longing to sin again.

"The rest of my life"—to-day was its inception. Ash Wednesday, fitting occasion to put the old behind and begin

upon the new. But lying in the bed, appraising her surroundings, she was aware of disappointment. The room was very like those apartments at the Palace, or the Rue de la Pompe. Simpler, but quite as comfortable; more comfortable than gorgeous crowded Versailles where privacy was the one luxury unknown. The solicitous Mère Lucie reminded her of kindly Mme Colbert. Both were kind; it was clear both meant to be kind, but something was wanting. It must be the fault of her unresponsive self that the change in circumstance was no essential change: life here as elsewhere was conditioned by her inflexible self to the same imperious demand—love.

Restless, though penetrated by a lassitude more profound than the fatigue of a sleepless night, she got up. She would go down to the Chapel. Mass would be over, but she might be in time to receive the blessed Ashes—to experience the reminder of eternal values.

The file of grey-gowned, black-veiled nuns proceeded two and two to the altar. In the dove-grey dress, black lace over her hair, she followed last of all to offer her forehead for the warning of mortality:

*"Remember, man, that thou art dust,
And unto dust shall thou return."*

Returned to a seat at the back of the chapel she strove to imagine the open grave, the clods falling on the coffin lid, the ice-cold enshrouded corpse festering into corruption, but the remembrance of life, the warmth, the perfume of love supervened.

God help me to forget him, to remember the end of all youth, love and heartbreak, is this dust. Even Louis, who would rise some two hours hence, he also to bend his proud head for the ashen cross, even mighty Louis must one day be humbled to worms and dust. Where would she be then? She visioned the years, rolling in like grey waves of a dreary sea, one after another.

At end of the Mass, Mère Lucie and a touch on her arm:

"Madame, a gentleman in the parlour, M. le Comte de Lauzun begs speech with you."

The Captain for the Quarter of the King's Bodyguard,

she knew him well. An eccentric, ugly little spitfire, poor, vain, yet courageous. He had occasioned her no little embarrassment during the progress of the Court with Henriette to Calais during the summer past. The Comte had pestered her with his attentions, made it apparent that he perceived a desirable partie in the King's old flame, titled and enriched. His absurdities had provided much amusement for Athénais de Montespan—much heartburning for Mlle de Montpensier, who nourished a secret passion for him in her royal and spinster breast. Louis could not have failed to recognize Louise's discomfort, but he had ignored the situation. She had been humiliated day after day till Madame Henriette, unvaryingly kindly in the day of fallen fortunes, had taken up the cudgels on her behalf. Between them the Duke and Duchess of Orléans had put Lauzun in his place.

The man had troubled her but she retained no animosity towards the queer little being striving for compensation for inferiority in a splendid world. Poor little Lauzun! A strange ambassador from Louis to herself.

"Will you inform the Count that I much regret I am unable to receive him. Thank you, *ma mère*."

She was left in peace till mid-day, for now it appeared a degree of peace to sit alone in the pleasant orderly bed-chamber with its sweet-smelling fire, the simple elegances of pale waxed floors and furniture, the snowy curtained bed, an ebony crucifix above it, the crocuses, mauve and yellow bunched in a copper bowl on the window seat. She sat there, looking out. As the morning advanced the sun shone, the trim lawns sparkled with dewdrops and thin melting frost. Above, the pale sky was patterned with gossamer clouds ruffled like a wave-moulded beach; in the near distance a giant cedar stretched wide branches like mournful reaching palms. Two or three of the sisters, thick shawls over grey habits, paced the flagged paths intent on Office or beads. Now and again a lady boarder, wrapped in furs against the February cold, would join them. Behind the cedar, gay and free, rose the voices of children at play.

The second visitor arrived soon after noon. A warmth rose in her heart at the entrance of the faithful friend. How good, how dependable he was! But Bernard de Bellefonds had come charged with an errand other than his own desire

to see her as he had often pictured her, freed from her chain at last. Sitting by her in a window-seat as once before, but now in the ease of tried friendship, he told her of his interview with the King. He had handed her letter personally as he had promised to do.

"His Majesty bade me wait while he read. He asked me then if I were acquainted with its contents. I told him, not in detail, but that I had the honour of your confidence and approved the resolution you had taken. He replied, without apparent resentment, that he was aware of our friendship and that this made me a fitting person to convey his reply."

Bellefonds spoke with the formal hesitancy which characterized him when embarrassed. He hurried on, anxious to be finished with a subject which must be painful for her. "His Majesty had little to say; he wrote this letter as he sat there and desired me to bear it to you without delay. It struck me that his manner was peculiar—not exactly aloof, but as if his attention were elsewhere. He dismissed me—and that, I think, is all that passed between us."

She opened the letter. Bellefonds averted his eyes from the big, scrawling handwriting, then, as once before in the Flemish farmhouse, he watched her bent face as she read, fearing to see again it lighten with excitement and thankfulness.

To his relief she looked up calmly, "The Court has left Paris?"

"His Majesty set out for Versailles this morning. To the general surprise, I believe." He was urgent to add, "I saw him start, Mlle de Montpensier accompanied him in the coach, also Mme. de Montespan."

Her face remained composed. "I do not think it needs me to write. Will you kindly take my reply. I cannot return."

"I will very gladly do so."

He was conscious that he would have welcomed a less laconic expression of her determination. For three years she had held a mysterious attraction for him, and since the death of his wife he had carried a dream in his heart. When her misery had been acute and she had drawn nearer to him, the dream had taken substance. If that dear aspiration could be realized everything would fall into place. As her husband he could defy the King; he could engage,

emboldened, the more formidable enemy: her vacillating heart.

She sighed. In the silence which followed that weary sound he decided. There would never be a more favourable moment, never one when security would be more necessary for her, when she would be less impelled to Louis. Certainly there could never be one wherein his love and pity would be greater. He leaned forward and the simplicity of his nature, of his desire, was expressed in the humility of face and words.

"If you could bring yourself to marry me!"

He received a quick look. Not of surprise nor displeasure; the dark eyes were defensive.

"I have little enough to offer you: you know my embarrassments, and that I am not like to better my position. I am fifty-one. I can give nothing but my name and my service to you, who are young and beautiful."

"Do not belittle yourself," she said gently.

"I do not wish to do so, Madame, since I am hoping for an acceptance. I venture to think that small as my advantages are, yet if you would concede me the right to defend you I could be of service."

The formal tone broke off and he ended warmly, "It would make me the proudest man alive!"

Her face awoke now; it flushed.

"It is rather I that should be proud. But a marriage with me would do you grievous harm: you are the head of an honourable house. Your kindness beholds me other than I am."

He stood up and looked with a half smile at her earnest face. "You do not know how I hold you. I will but say, now, you are the only lady living I could desire for my wife. That that is true, God knows—Louise."

She sighed again and at this apparent weakness and because she had suffered him to call her by name, the poor suitor took heart and ventured to resume his seat closer to her, to take, to kiss the unresisting hand. He strove to bare his heart. It was abject in devotion to a being far above him, an injured goddess. In his ignorance of the mystery she was for him he was incapable of perceiving that this humility stood him in poor stead, but anxiously, hopefully, he strove against her silence.

"I would sell my charge as Master of the Horse. We

could leave France and voyage. You would love to see the beauties of other lands. The Tyrolcse, Savoy, down to Rome and to Florence we could go. You should wander at your pleasure."

Now her dreaming eyes brightened ; she looked at the pleading freckled face as if eager for the liberty he pictured.

"Why, I have never been abroad, and often I have longed to travel fast and far."

Come with him, then ! He would relinquish anything, go anywhere. She listened to this offer of a man to break with his past, his present, his traditions and interests, his very nature, and made comparison with the man who had given her a false position, a life in hiding, unease, and finally a recognition which had shamed her. She saw Louis as for long past, in his complete egoism. Doubtless, if ever he gave her a serious thought it was a complacent reflection that he had come out of the affair with credit, generously.

Suddenly angry, she felt triumphant. Mediocre in person and wealth, yet the respected holder of an unblemished name, this other man would be proud to make her his wife.

Her knowledge of him assured her that to lose his discarded mistress to Bellefonds would annoy Louis who never, if he could help it, lost anything to anyone. Louise de la Vallière might rank as one of his insignificant possessions, but she was *his* ; to see her pass to another would be unacceptable.

"If I thought of my own interests how gladly I would say yes. But I cannot overlook the inconvenience such a step might bring to you. The King might . . ."

He dismissed the objection. Inconvenience ! He was the Head of his family, of ripe years, free to make his own choice. As for His Majesty—Bernard de Bellefonds, Maréchal of France, found a proud answer.

"My sword, my life, are at the King's disposal, but the Sovereigns of France hold no jurisdiction over the marriage of a nobleman who is of age. It is indeed in King Louis's power to degrade his Marshal, but this must be justified on other grounds than a gentleman's intention to wed where he pleases !"

She listened, gratified, tempted ; and the prime inducement came from his urgency.

"Let me return forthwith and face the King as your

betrothed." He was persuading her. For this offer of a quick decision, breaking with the past with a shout, horses and flight, obscured the figure of the companion in adventure ; the little man, respected, liked, type of the normal life of which she had no knowledge. In the thrilling chapter he unrolled before her she recognized herself, rushing to the unknown, somewhat as she had hastened once, under M. Colbert's care, from the West Gate of Paris to the secret meeting-place. But if she pictured Bernard de Bellefonds, it was as a second, kindlier, Colbert.

As she visioned and yielded herself to temptation, M. Colbert's name was announced. At once a chill struck Bellefond's soaring spirits. "Do not receive him," he advised urgently.

Madame de la Vallière acquiescing in her friend's counsel, the nun withdrew, bearing the proper compliments and regrets.

But the Minister was of different stuff from M. de Lauzun. The sister returned with the Great Man's title to an audience : His Majesty's business.

The confederates looked at each other ; debated. Finally Bellefonds withdrew his objection providing he himself were present at the interview.

In the reception parlour, a large handsome *salon* consecrated to the visits of the distinguished parents on Sundays and Holidays sat the unwelcome visitor contemplating a long table of waxed mahogany where, each on its lace d'oyley, prize volumes of gilded morocco were set out at intervals, rather like a dinner-party of books.

He rose stiffly. "This gentleman, Madame ?"

On hearing that the gentleman was present at Madame's express desire, M. Colbert intimated without fashions that his business was for Madame's ear alone. The Maréchal not budging, M. Colbert remaining dumb, the lady in the grey gown standing unhelpfully between them, matters were at a deadlock. Finally the visitor coughed, blew his nose lavishly and taking up his beaver from where it lay among the gilded prizes and immaculate needlework, said :

"I'll bid you good-day, Madame. Good-day to you, Sir," and marched out, the door closing heavily behind him.

M. de Bellefonds took his leave almost immediately after. He rode post-haste, anxious to forestall M. Colbert with the Royal Master. He rode in sober triumph, charged not

only with the Duchesse de la Vallière's humble duty, her respectful regrets, but authorized to inform His Majesty that, having received a most honourable offer of marriage, she had decided to take it into her best consideration.

Louise, left alone, went out into the gardens. Wrapped in her grey cloak, the white fur collar drawn up about her face, she struck down the flagged paths. It was chilly now, the short February afternoon hastening to evening was wrapped in a damp mist through which the red, morose sun descended. The deserted garden had become a cheerless place of empty flower beds and black, naked branches, but the despondency did not communicate itself to Louise. She was exhilarated by a bold decision taken. She walked rapidly, the heels of her shoes tapping on the flagged path seemed to be traversing stepping stones to freedom. Her spirits rose till, rounding the great cedar, in a narrow alley closed in by a box hedge and overshadowed by the gaunt, flat branches, she came face to face with M. Colbert.

She stopped dead. "This is inexcusable!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE great M. Colbert, Chief Minister of France, saw nothing derogatory in his delicate commission. Rather, he undertook it gladly; a recovery of royal confidence feared on the decline; a tribute to his ability to handle difficult affairs. Above all, he saw it as an opportunity. The return of Mme de la Vallière to Court could not fail to be a reverse for the hated Louvois, supporter of the Montespan and Colbert's political antagonist; managed adroitly, it might lead to his downfall. The possibilities of the occasion thus providentially provided exercised the great man's mind during the cold drive from Versailles to Chaillof, when, a shivering mummy, swathed from head to foot in furs and rugs, jolted from side to side of the Coach travelling furiously, postillions yelling *Gare! Gare!* at all and sundry, he debated how best to employ this embassy to further the great interests he had at heart.

Jean-Baptiste Colbert's massive energies, for ten years devoted to the material advancement of his Country, were now concentrated on the preservation of his achievement. During those first eight years his policy of internal prosperity had flourished without a check; for the last two it had been threatened. War, even an expedition such as the War of Devolution now ostensibly concluded (he dubbed it, contemptuously, "All fanfare and trumpets!") was anathema to his provident spirit. He had, perforce, provisioned the King's military parade, footed the bill, with ill grace. But the accounts were scarcely filed when the presage of worse to come menaced the unhappy Chief Paymaster. The silhouette of young Louvois, a mincing, aggravating shadow in 1668, to-day loomed an ugly, far-reaching cloud, darkening the whole of M. Colbert's sky. War was in the air again. A design so fantastically expensive, so heartbreakingly wasteful, that his thrifty soul shivered with apprehension.

From the first inkling of this baleful policy, he set himself to circumvent it; not overtly. Jean-Baptiste knew better than to throw down a challenge to the King, recognized from the onset as the real adversary. The detestable Louvois, the warmonger, the little clique of aristocrats, officers itching for the one employment left them, these he might have despatched, one by one, if the Master had not stood behind. Colbert knew his Sovereign better than he knew himself; feared, mistrusted, and admired him. He dared not look forward to a day when Louis, standing at the crossroads, the opening move on the European board in his hands, should cast his France for War. To prevent this catastrophe no effort was too great, no price too high.

The signs were several. Changes. He saw them as ominous. When Louis chose, he chose well. The unscrupulous bully, Louvois, for Council Chamber, the adventuress without heart or conscience for his bed. Fit associates for a journey which was not Colbert's road, and certainly foreign country to the unworldly Louise de la Vallière.

Ominous signs or no, Jean-Baptiste was not daunted. His whole life had been spent in struggling, in building up; the results of ten years of careful husbandry, garnered, should not be blown to chaff from the cannon's mouth. Patiently, courageously, he set to work to protect the child of his labour. At every turn, he strove to outwit his rival, recover his King. Nothing was inconsiderable, if it might be used at some

time to discredit Louvois or his confederates, nothing too arduous if it would convince the royal Master that an old tried servant can succeed where newer tools have failed.

These activities, far-reaching and often dubious, were subsidiary to the prime task. The God's appetite for supremacy must be fed. The Minister planned to tempt a greedy Prince with a richer bait than any paltry acquisition of Spanish Colonies. Surely the King's women, whoever they might be (or not be) were outside the grandiose strategy which should present to the King of France the Commerce of the World and its pre-requisite, Dominion of the Seas. Was it not Louis's masculine boast that he knew how to keep affairs of heart apart from affairs of State? But Jean-Baptiste, with the realism of the domestic man, knew better. The King flattered himself. His beauties might lack direct political influence, but no woman fails of authority over the man dependent on her for emotional satisfaction. Axiomatically the King's Mistress must be of the party of the King's Minister if the latter would not be hampered at every turn by backstairs intrigue. From long habit, Colbert had associated Louise de la Vallière with his fortunes; with her he had risen, with hers his favour had declined. She remained at Court, *maitresse-en-titre*, neglected, superseded; he sat in the Council; First Minister playing second fiddle. But memory of the great days when she had reigned over the heart of her lover, and his darling policies had been approved, shared as by a friend, fortified Colbert in adversity. What had been could be again.

He blamed Louise for much; she had ignored his advice, behaved with incredible stupidity, shrinking into herself at the first evidence of waning love. She had stood still and let herself be thrust aside. Things had gone far, yet to-day's events had proved her still of value to the King. The difficulty was, mused the Statesman anxiously, how to handle this incalculable creature, for long regarded by him as a security for favour, finally as a disappointing investment yielding no dividends. Pride, habit, and more than all, the profound, unconscious superstition of coincidence, the conviction that his luck marched hand-in-hand with hers, were concerned in her reinstatement.

How best to use her? First of all she must be roused. Jealousy? Under intense provocation she had displayed

none. Proper pride? No self-respecting woman would have stayed in such a humiliating position. Her children's future? Never had there been a more indifferent mother. Unnatural defects, yet Jean-Baptiste, himself devoted to one estranged woman, was able to discern single-hearted affection in another; the man spiritually divorced sympathized with it. Politics apart, it would have afforded him the satisfaction of a fellow sufferer to see the King's affections restored to his early lover. "She has only one interest in life—if she won't do it for his sake, she won't do it at all!" he decided.

But this decision did not solve his major problem. That revolved round a discovery, the fruit of two years' patient, secret investigation. It had taken him into ugly regions and the lowest company. Under various aspects it was rarely out of his thoughts: a danger, a State secret, a forlorn hope and a trump card. In whichever way it presented itself it had the quality of omnipresence, it never completely left him alone. To no inconsiderable extent this constant companionship solaced the man deprived of the due of all model husbands, the sympathy of an affectionate and understanding spouse. Many a night, lying beside a persistently turned cold shoulder, the bereaved consoled himself with a glorious anticipation. If he played that trump card wisely, he would hold Athénais de Montespan and, through her, Louvois, in the hollow of his hand. But for his game he needed a partner. Under that title he envisaged the runaway he had been ordered to seek. As an ally, her picture perplexed him, while well wrapped he sat in his coach and the short February afternoon grew colder and greyer, his four fine horses galloped and sweated, and his postillions cracked their long whips and shouted a warning for all who could hear.

Bellefonds was the first obstacle. Easily evaded. A casual inquiry told him where the lady walked, a half-pistole in the porter's respectful palm—he never made the mistake of over-bribing—and he was free of the garden. A little patience, stamping cold feet on the flagged path and he had the fugitive by herself.

Disregarding a displeased and startled face, he countered her "This is inexcusable, Sir," with an expostulation of his own—"I must confess I am hurt, Madame; I should hope I have the right to a hearing after all these years!"

The remonstrance unheeded, she turned away. He kept pace. She observed coldly that she had nothing to say.

He retorted that she need say nothing, only do him the favour of listening to a few words—then he would leave her—on his honour, now! She walked the faster.

"If you can't trust me," deplored Jean-Baptiste, puffing a little at such inconsiderate haste, "an old friend—the little ones as dear to my wife as her own—and more than her own—it's a pity, I must say. His Majesty gave me a message; you refuse to hear it. Good! You'll put me in an unpleasant position; you appreciate that, of course, but let it pass. For my own part I've something to tell you. The King would be furious if he knew I'd mentioned it. He's sick—that's at the bottom of all this ill-humour of his—he's a sick man."

Her pace was maintained; her face stayed averted in disdain.

"I'm only His Majesty's servant, but I'll be hanged if I'd desert him in his need." He took a deep noisy breath. "D'you suppose he hasn't changed to me too? D'you suppose I'm made of wood when I see his favour turned to that fellow Louvois with his knavish tricks and his foul wars? Eating up the money; pulling down all I've slaved for for years. Thankless! That's what it is! But it doesn't change me—I'm not made that way. I don't understand you women." His tone grew increasingly bitter. "Take my wife—always in a pet these days—I can't please her. But one thing I'd stake my oath—if my wife was sick, body or spirit, I'd stand by her; I'd not choose the moment to make off and leave her to it. Not though she's made my life sour enough this many a day. Ever since that cursed Peace it is I've noticed the difference. Peace indeed!" he concluded with gloomy retrospection. "Don't talk of peace, one thing and the other I don't know what it means."

He had hurried himself breathless, but it was worth it for she slackened, looked at him commiseratingly and spoke.

"I'm grieved to know you unhappy, M. Colbert. I didn't know. I've nothing but kind feeling for you—you and Madame have always been my good friends. Isn't this perhaps a misunderstanding? Forgive me if I intrude on your affairs, but might there be something I could do to help you—and Madame?"

This relenting, beyond his expectations, held no reproach for Jean-Baptiste. How like a woman to seize on a trivial personal affair and ignore the real issue; what material

to be compelled to take into account ! Despising it, he was quick to exploit this feminine peculiarity.

"Help me !" The ejaculation was fervent. "There's no one could help me better." But to help him she must let him explain, and if he was to explain he needed to sit down. "I'm not as young as I was ; my breath's short." He took her arm. "If we could sit for a few moments, no need to go indoors." (Better out of range of those pious nuns, he thought.) "There's a comfortable bench I can see yonder. It's only a few words."

They sat side by side in the gathering twilight, across which a chill breeze had risen to whisper forlornly, he in his fur-lined cloak, his hat jammed down to his eyebrows, she, compunctious, insisting that he sit on a fold of her mantle to ward off the damp. Thus comforted, the good friend began on his few words. They were prefaced by a cough, a blowing of the nose. Flourishing a large handkerchief, he stowed it up a wide sleeve with ungainly dexterity, as if anxious to prove that in a disordered world something could and should be put in its proper place.

"The way I look at it is this. You don't know the truth and, that being so, you ought to be told. Madame Louise, the King's sick. Now, is that the moment to run off to a fine-lady convent and leave a man ? Why, it's unseemly after all these years. The children, too, let alone religion ! I don't doubt you've been sorely tried, my dear Madame, I have myself ; I can sympathize. But we've our duty to do for all that—both of us—and our first duty is to the King." He nodded his head at the great cedar, a gaunt outline, black against the pallid grey-blue sky, as if inviting it to bear witness to his principles. "Duty comes first, I say."

He caught a murmur ; something ineffectual. "What is one's duty ?" He brushed aside this triviality firmly.

"I'm only a plain man—all France knows how I started in life—and I reasoned that a lady like you couldn't know how ill he was or you'd never leave him to—*that woman*." He spat out the words and gave the averted face a sharp, confidential look. "She's at the bottom of all this trouble—and more too. It's my duty to look about me, and I don't speak without cause. She's no good to him or anyone

else. A right-down bad lot, if I may be pardoned the expression, Madame."

"I don't give a sou for what all your priests and nuns have to tell you." He raised an admonitory forefinger. "It's a plain duty to rescue the King from his enemies, isn't it? What's his life nowadays? Turning night into day, too much strong drink—unwholesome, doctored stuff I'll take my oath—gambling. You'd open your eyes if you knew what Madame la Marquise runs through at a sitting. Bawdy jokes—blasphemous they are at times; I've heard 'em. All manner of extravagance! That's not him—that's her. The Master's one to expect value for money. Many a time he's said to me, 'I want the best at the lowest price, Colbert,' and I always found it for him."

He stopped, partly for lack of breath, and because he thought it was time she said something.

Watching her, the thin contour of cheek and chin, the long, delicate features, the mistrusted, familiar expression of a withdrawal, he thought, "It's not a weak face, by any means, though she's been weak all through. She's a woman of one idea—no room in her head for anything else," and the suspicion of inflexibility in the opponent increased his desire to acquire the ally, to harness this force to his own ends.

"Listen, Madame Louise," the thick voice insinuated. "I'll tell you something—in confidence; I know enough about—a certain person—to ruin her!" Anticipating the persistence of an obstinate silence which should disconcert this bold start, he repeated firmly, "And when I say ruin, I mean *ruin*!"

She looked at him now, another startled displeased look.

"What *do* you mean by ruin?"

The sense of this inquiry, still more the expression, eluded him. Now what did she mean by that? Had she already a suspicion of her rival's nefarious practices? Or was it merely some affected delicacy or a desire to discomfort him? He decided to hedge.

"Eh? I didn't catch that. What did you please to say?"

The soft, winning voice deplored, "Hasn't she lost everything already? Husband, child, her home, perhaps her peace of mind as well?"

M. Colbert discouraged this incursion into false sentiment by an impressive "Tch! Such females set no store by husbands and children, or homes either. As for peace, they take precious care no one else shall enjoy any. You're wasting your pity, Madame. If you've any to spare, spend it on His Majesty. Come back with me to-night, now, when he needs you. Why I hear he's had a fine tussle with that termagant this very morning, but all her jealousy couldn't hinder him from sending for you three times in one day!"

"Once he came himself to bring me back."

Holy Blue! What a feeble thing to say! Would she never desist from these ill-judged remarks? Was her persistence nothing better than sentimental obstinacy, inherent in women? Exasperated by the necessity for humouring such foolishness and still more by the doubts such a useless propensity revived, he forced himself to say, soothingly, "Yes, yes, very natural! But he's not himself, you must remember," while he reflected—"I oughtn't to risk it—I've always doubted if she's the sort of person I need." Yet his native tenacity reinforced by that old superstition that their Fates were linked, impelled him to persist.

"You're a sensitive lady, my dear Madame Louise. You attach too much importance to trifles. They don't mean much to men. Just now, you said maybe my wife and I had a misunderstanding. Maybe—maybe sometimes you are at cross purposes with the King. Why not make allowances if he appears at times to do you a wrong."

He saw the dawn of a smile sadden her face. "I do not misunderstand the King, M. Colbert."

The quiet conviction of her voice impressed him. The uneasy, calculating mind was informed by a flash of insight. She might be incapable of furthering her interests; she might be an unreliable ally for his great design; but she had one supreme advantage. The woman who understood Louis, was the person to open his eyes. Black Magic was a repellent disorder; Colbert, well acquainted with the ugly side of life, in the course of his hunting in the underworld of Paris, had been staggered by the depths to which the high-born Athénais had descended. He could not conceive how to bring such degradation to the ears of the man concerned. Louis would writhe under it. No matter how

irrefutable the proofs, how respectful their presentation, he would writhe and he would never forgive either the offender or the witness of his humiliation. That the Arbiter of Europe should be exposed to himself as the deluded victim of a vicious woman and a gang of blasphemous priests and gutter sweepings was unspeakable; he who should speak it might come to wish he had first cut out his tongue. "I don't envy anyone the job," Colbert put it to himself.

There was an exception. There was one voice which could escape the condemnation. The gentle, silvery voice which had so irritated M. Colbert with its inconsequence. There could be no question of humiliation for Louis with her. Your kind wife didn't think the less of you because your rotten teeth were pulled and your breath smelt badly; she just gave your sore cheek a kiss so soft it couldn't hurt, told you how brave you were, and how scurvily the surgeon-barber had used you; and then found some sweet perfume to take away the foul taste. Jean-Baptiste checked a mournful flight into the past by recalling with pessimism that, however indubitably Louise de la Vallière might be the one and only person to open the King's eyes, she couldn't do it unless her own were opened first. Again his anxious face questioned the on-coming night which, in its progress, must needs witness the solution of this difficulty, as if beseeching it to prophecy. He wiped his forehead with that good linen handkerchief embroidered once on a time by affectionate, skilful hands.

"If you mean what you were kind enough to propose, Madame, there is something you could do. It concerns His Majesty. But before I enter on it I'll esteem your good word for confidence. My name must be kept out of it—for the present at all events."

He felt a movement by his side. In the failing light he detected a slight derisive smile on the face, pale in the dark frame of the hood.

"Why, you remind me of M. Fouquet." The words fell slowly, solemnly as an epitaph. A silence, like the meditation accorded to the invocation of the dead, fell between the man and the woman. Wrapped in their dark cloaks, their heads bent, they sat as mourners before a grave.

That moment surrendered to the call of memory; he

moved uneasily, shuffled his feet, cleared his throat and stammered, "I don't know what you mean by that."

"Do you know anything?" The low voice throbbed. She made a little outflung gesture as if in her turn calling on the shadows to bear witness. "For all your watching and searching? He, too, asked me to help him—to keep his confidence. He didn't know me and I didn't know the King, then. Do you know more than M. Fouquet did? Don't ask me to keep your secrets. I promised to do that before. I know better now."

He began, "It's quite a different situation—this is not to benefit myself——" to be interrupted wearily :

"To what end should I go back? I cannot be other than I am. He knows it well. We are best apart ; I am only a reproach. I have often felt—I felt last night—that the sight of me brings out the worst in him."

If he affected sympathy, he did not feel it.

"I know you've had a bitter time, but can't you see it's due to that evil influence?" He fumbled at her knee, cold puffy fingers found her own. "Come back with me to-night. You'll not regret it. You can name your own conditions. His Majesty gives you his royal word for it. What has been can be again. Wouldn't you joy to be rid of her, for the sake, for yours, for mine? I'll go further, I'm asking you for the sake of all France."

Now, for the first time he spoke with honesty. Behind the commonplace voice, hoarse with his cold, pleaded love for his dear ideal, that creation of well-being wherein men should labour to thrive, not to destroy ; where the King's coffers, overflowing, should stream into the channels of a mighty trade.

But he had no music for his song, no eloquence to convert to his religion a visionary whose heart was in thrall to other dreams. Yet his appeal appeared to have gone home ; her face brightened with attentive thought.

"Maybe I shall go back—for a little time. But if I go it must be in my own way."

With the beginning of a wary elation, he hastened to assure her that her provision was barest reason ; she must make a cardinal point of her conditions. He would not presume to intrude on intimate matters but, knowing her unselfishness, he thought it his duty to remind her to make good use of this providential opportunity. With an effort

that resembled desperation, he made up his mind—confidence or no, now or never—to tell her what he knew and hope for the best.

He opened his lips. “It is, of course, essential that Madame de Montespan——” But stopped, struck by the expression of her face. It was lovely, animated, now as she smiled at him.

“I know what I shall ask. I shall be able to help M. Fouquet, after all these years.”

Jean-Baptiste stiffened in his seat. He was speechless; his patience, his endurance at an end. She was hopeless; not merely blind to her own interests but actively hostile to his. Destroy the first solid achievement of his life, would she? Let loose that scoundrel-thief, his old enemy; set him free for revenge and all manner of mischief? What a woman. No wonder the King had wearied of the obstinate, useless creature with her genius for failure and espousing the lost cause. She’d never keep him—she’d never hold her own against any woman with her head screwed on.

In that angry silence, the conservative man became a revolutionary. He changed his policy. The painful wrench reversing the system of a lifetime, left him stunned, incapable of further effort, resigned to a dull thankfulness that he had kept his secret. He sat there, limp, conscious of chill and of growing old.

A ray of light piercing the murky labyrinth of his brain recalled him; the calculation by which she, the thriftless, could yet be used to serve him. Yes, he would take her back to the King; and afterwards his merchandise, intact, enhanced by her return, should be carried to a more profitable market; one where he could drive a good bargain. Yet, despite this conclusion worthy of a sensible tradesman, as they walked in sobriety to his waiting coach, he was conscious of a weakness—an affection for the fool whose heart must always rule her head.

CHAPTER IX

"She came back like a fool."

(Memoirs of Mlle de Montpensier.)

COLBERT set her down in the Rue de la Pompe. She would find His Majesty there, he told her briefly. No, he would not come in; he had a little matter of business to attend to. He waited till the door had closed on her, then drove away in the direction of the Palace.

The vestibule, warm, bright, fragrant with flowers, might have appeared welcoming to a weary traveller entering from a black and winter night. She felt it cheerless, an antagonistic encounter. The crystals of the chandelier depended frostily, the tall white and gold doors held themselves aloof, the bowls of many coloured tulips stood stiff as candles, the lackeys hurrying forward seemed to proffer a heartless alacrity. She passed upstairs and heard her footsteps wake the echoes of an empty house.

In the boudoir, her maid whispered, with a cautionary glance towards an inner door. She went to it at once and stood in the doorway. It was dim here, where a man sat over the fire, his head in his hands. He looked up and a dull face brightened.

"Louise?"

"Yes, I am here," she said it quietly and remained looking down on him. He looked strange. He had removed his wig: divested of the imposing wealth of formal curls the cropped head bristling with short chestnut hair had a defenceless appearance. The unbuttoned brown velvet coat revealed a crumpled shirt; the untied lace cravat hung limp and tawdry. On the carpet, a little distance from his stockinged feet, a pair of scarlet-heeled shoes sprawled like slovens. The dishevelment of this master of propriety was peculiar in itself. The change of expression which had greeted her entrance passed, leaving a heavy and disconsolate face. In the poor light she could discern crows-feet etched between the thick brows, the vertical lines barring the hard, captious mouth. With a pang, she saw him for the first time as no longer young and fine. It was a careworn man in middle life who sat hunched before her fire.

"You've been a mighty long time coming." A querulous voice. "Just like you to go off without a word."

"You had my letter, Sir," She said it defensively.

"Your letter!" The bowed shoulders jerked. "What explanation was there in that, pray? Excuse me that I keep my seat. An indisposition. A touch of vertigo." He motioned her to approach, his hand reached to her mantle. "That thing's damp. You'd best remove it." She took off hood and cloak, appreciating the disproportionate solicitude, conscious of the watching eyes under the heavy lids.

"I owe you an apology for making free with your lodging, I suppose." It was said with a kind of dejected and defiant humour, and as she returned a conventional disclaimer, he regarded the woman standing above him, erect and composed in her plain grey gown, unhappily.

"I told you last night to expect me. When I make an appointment, it is my habit to adhere to it."

Bitter amusement deprived her of further words. He had said he would come—he had come. His public insult, her flight, these could not deflect the appointed way.

"My throat is painful, this side particularly." He put his fingers to it gingerly, and she detected the important self-pity of a child unused to illness. "I was about to tell you of it last night, but you flew into a tantrum about that little sonnet of yours and wouldn't give me a moment."

It was pure egoism; it was also pure Louis, and to her comprehensible and pathetic. When he added, "I've been sitting here two hours and twenty minutes exactly, waiting for you, my head splitting, all the work I have in hand neglected—waiting till I'd wellnigh given you up—" She did not hesitate, but knelt down and laid her head against his knee; his hand descended and stroked the pale shining hair.

"Tell me all about it," she invited gently.

He was obviously pleased to do so. He was out of sorts, nausea, headache, dizziness and now a sore throat. He had suffered from similar attacks before, and he couldn't understand it. Doctors? Louis's opinion of his eminent physicians was a poor one. Purges, emetics, cupping; he knew the formulæ by heart. "Much good they did my poor little Henriette, letting her die in agony without lifting a finger. As for those blockheads, Vallot and Esprit, they've poison on the brain ever since. I consulted Vallot for the

first of these attacks of mine. He could invent no better excuse for his ignorance than to declare he suspected some noxious substance ! I'll not permit that disgraceful scandal to be raked up a second time because I chance to have a migraine. A pretty thing to get abroad—an attempt to poison the King ! They'll be accusing my brother again next ! I'll have no more of such impudent allegations. I prefer to keep my trouble to myself." Indignation ended in a sigh, he resumed with mournful pride. "I passed an ill night but rose at my usual hour, held my levée, heard Mass with the Queen, gave audience to Lauzun, Bellefonds and Colbert. You might have spared me that"—his glance accused the blonde head resting against his knee. It did not lift at the reproach, and, impelled to exact the sympathy and approbation he required, he began again.

"Everything depends on me, you know that. I can't afford to be ill. As I say, I worked till I could scarce sit upright. At five o'clock, I had finished and was free to come here for a little peace and quietness. I *might* have expected it but no, the first thing I learn is that you decline to return. As if I hadn't sufficient annoyance already. Where are you off to now ?" He eyed her suspiciously as she rose.

"Only to give my wraps to my maid."

"A moment. I have a letter here—for Athénais." He groped impatiently among the cushions of the couch, and held out a crumpled paper. "Have the kindness to seal it for me and see it despatched, if you please. I've had enough of her furies for one day. I've told her I'm spending the evening here and don't wish to be disturbed. You'll not turn me out again, I presume ?"

She had a grave smile for the aggrieved allusion. It had been two years earlier in her first revulsion ; he had been hugely affronted and had not asked her to receive him since.

She sealed the letter, repelled by the insensitive commission. Athénais would be beside herself with jealousy, but the reflection brought no triumph ; if she felt anything she felt sorry for the woman.

Her return was greeted with a half-apology. His indisposition made him irritable. He launched into a further account of his symptoms. "It commenced shortly before the ball last night. I took a glass of Sillery and orange water

with Athénâis at eight o'clock, one glass only—and felt like retching in ten minutes. No, the oranges were perfectly sound"—he rejected her mild suggestion emphatically and with some irritation—"Athénâis drank with me and she was not affected."

To her surprise he drew an orange from his pocket and holding it to the candle examined it. "A mere precaution. It is not to be thought that my enemies are of my own household."

Resettling himself in the couch, he inserted a tiny silver knife under the rind. She watched the deliberate, competent peeling with astonishment. The fruit quartered, he held it out to her, smiled, "Let us live and die together," and put a portion into his mouth. "Would I suffer you to incur harm, my child? Athénâis is jealous, and choleric, but she would not hurt a fly."

He returned to his complaints. "If I could have gone to my bed like any other man. But no, I must attend that miserable ball, because of all the chatter if I failed to appear. Dance! Palsambleu, I was put to it to stand. One single Coranto exhausted me. Me, Louise, who, as you know, can dance the night out and start on work the next morning as fresh as a boy. Sit you down, my dear; I have somewhat to ask you." The boastful regret became portentous. "Tell me the truth," she waited until she was seated, then addressed her with anxious solemnity. "Speak frankly, did I present anything of feebleness last night? Was I unlike myself?"

Wryly amused, yet isolating the genuine fear from the pomposity, she replied, smiling:

"Frankly, I found you your usual self."

"You did? You relieve my mind. If you saw nothing amiss, others are not like to have done so. Thank you, Louise. To say truth I feel better since you came, my dear. The attack appears to be passing. I could sleep a little now, maybe."

She made him comfortable with a rug and some cushions, and resuming her seat by the hearth watched him lying quietly with eyes closed. With sad satisfaction she recognized the significance of his return. Only with her dare he abandon himself, betray his weakness, his fear of weakness; drop the cherished rôle of Majesty, as he had discarded the imposing wig, lying flattened on her table; sit unashamed with shorn head and disordered dress, escaped

from the edifice he had erected for his pride and which had become his prison. She had little apprehension for his malady, probably like most normally healthy men he exaggerated aches and pains, but the impervious complacency encountered so closely for the first time for many months shocked her.

"My poor Louis!"

By his return he stood confessed. By the test of his need he was hers. Athénais might clutch him by the fetters of the flesh, his wife retain by ties of policy and convention, but the affinity discovered in a flash of eyes meeting ten years ago on a summer's night at Fontainebleau stood revealed, a bond of the Spirit surviving injury, separation, even the divergence of their minds. In a moment the bitter past could be disregarded, he claim her and she respond.

The bond held, even against disenchantment. This sad man lying heavily before her was no royal lover. Glamour had forsaken him. She perceived him of common clay, faithless, sensual, insensitive, slave and fool of a mastering pride. But out of all mankind this creature was her own. She turned with thankfulness to his abiding greatness, the fidelity to his vocation, Kingship; remembered his patience and industry, his sense of responsibility, his unflinching care for the children of the wife and the lover he had each in turn forsaken. Encompassed by a world of sycophants, his every action and word lauded to the skies, it was a miracle he had escaped utter degeneration.

"Poor Louis," she repeated softly, regarding with profound compassion the worn face over which the firelight flickered in light and shadow. She recognized that the zest of life had left him. The sleeper with the lined face and hard, contemptuous mouth was worlds away from the happy young man who, at their wayside picnic, had flung his toasting glass over his shoulder; who had ridden with her through autumn woods at Fontainebleau, singing and content. Who delighted in their holiday trips to the little homely Versailles, to Villers Cotterets where he teased Henriette and herself shamelessly about their babies and laughed himself to tears over Philip's absurdities. Nor was he even the half-hearted lover of three years gone by, who had pulled her up to dance with him on a tiny lawn with a sparkling fountain, to the music of fiddlers hidden in an orchard of apple-blossom.

That was the last, reflected Louise mournfully, the last of his youth and mine. Thereafter the decline had been rapid—Avesnes, separation, the discovery of his faithlessness, stages in the hardening of his heart. To-day his deterioration was patent to any honest observer. Bellefonds ascribed it to neglect of religion, Colbert to the influence of an evil woman, she looked inwards for cause and for excuse. If he could have stayed faithful in marriage he might have been a good man as well as a great king, she thought, reminding herself sadly that it was for her he had first deserted his young wife. He was weak whom all called strong. And he was friendless ; out of a world of adulation he had but one lover, herself. But how to heal the victim enamoured of his disease ? Athénais might be a disaster, but the venom of power infected his blood. He lived alone, in the desert of omnipotence. None dare approach him, none tell him the truth.

Yet for to-night he had admitted her to his dereliction.

"Oh God, show me a way." As if she had spoken aloud, his eyes opened on her sitting there, her face sweet and sad.

"Louise ?"

"I am here." His mother might have soothed with such gentle reassurance. His eyes closed again ; the discontented mouth softened beneath the hint of a smile.

"I'll tell you something. As I sat there waiting, feeling mighty low, I assure you, unlike myself, I heard you say 'I am here,' and at the sound of your voice my whole soul quivered with joy—strange !"

Never, even in the first days of love, had she heard him speak with deeper feeling. She recognized her moment and, without hesitation, she responded firmly :

"I am here, trusting in your word."

His eyes opened. "You will find me as good as my word. Ask on, Madame."

She saw the smile deteriorate to an old familiar look, possessive and indulgent, and divined the request he anticipated. "Athénais may go packing," said the smile.

She spoke quickly to forestall his putting it into words. "My desire is that the King shall do justice to M. Fouquet, his prisoner."

The expression halted. His eyebrows lifted, the utmost concession permitted to astonishment.

"Fouquet? He has justice. He was guilty—he is in prison."

"Sir, you are better acquainted than I with the whole truth of this matter, but as I remember it you exceeded the sentence of the Court." She said it with great dignity.

He frowned towards the earnest face. "You have a long memory." The vexation smoothed out. "Confess or be damned, is it? But you do not put me in the wrong. The prisoner in question has served six years of solitary confinement. It suffices justice. Henceforth he will enjoy the privileges of a political prisoner. Madame Fouquet and her daughter left Paris for Pignerol some four weeks ago; unless hindered by bad weather, they should by now be at their journey's end."

"You did that yourself?" She said it gladly.

"Why, yes, does that surprise you? Her great desire is to share his captivity." He added sententiously: "Experience has taught me that no man is so worthless but some soft-hearted woman will waste her life on him."

She sat gazing down into the fire, passive under the sense of accomplishment. There was nothing to say; it was the end of a chapter. She was relieved of debt. Fouquet and the woman who in their encounter at the Palais Brion had put her to shame with a courageous love—these were no longer her affair. Together these shades might recede down the misty lane of memory, exorcised, appeased. They left her sitting by her fireside with Louis: this night strangely afforded them, last of a procession of the meetings of lovers. The orange feathers of the fire streamed upwards, the dark wings of the night streamed past no less, bearing her on to a destination unknown and inexorable, a journey on which she saw no companion save her ineludable self.

"Your desire being again anticipated in what else may I serve you?"

She was recalled by the ironic voice. Here was Louis, who, admitting justice, measured it to the inch. Louis, who also in bondage had only herself to work for his escape. With sudden clarity she saw him in a new light—a responsibility. The realization grew on her as she listened to the familiar voice which had been so hard to resist, so apt to compel.

"I had it in mind that you desired my consent to a marriage. That—and maybe some other matters? Why not be frank with me?"

Bellefonds? Athénais? What was to be would be, but she felt her disassociation from one and all. If, listening, reluctant, to a persuasive intruder in the twilight garden; if sitting by a companion grown strangely taciturn on the drive home through the fallen night, she had permitted herself to be tempted, now, face to face with it she recognized the error of Colbert's dogma. That which has been *cannot* be again. The Past, dear masterpiece of Youth, hangs complete in the gallery of life, but the art is lost; it cannot be repainted.

"Come, Sweetheart, no need to stand on dignity with me."

Dignity? What did it mean? She experienced a sudden weariness.

"My dear Louise, this business of Fouquet apart—I regard that as a weakness of your over-scrupulous conscience—can you look me in the face and deny that you have returned at my request on the understanding, the very natural understanding, that I break with Athénais?"

She looked full at him. "I do not know why I have come back. Athénais? Oh no, she was not in my mind."

Surprised, piqued, he gave the candid face a look of reproving admiration. "Your mind, you incomprehensible person, pray what is in your mind? Will you inform me why you ran off, why you come back, what you expect of me, in short, what is taking place behind that baffling white forehead? You are the only woman in the world who can frown and look good-humoured. Sit down, I dislike to hold a serious conversation from a distance. Sit here and explain yourself."

She seated herself at the further end of the couch, and facing him across it said ruefully, "I can't. I don't know what I want."

He moved nearer, till her hand was within his reach and stroked it lazily. "You dear little fool. I know what you want—and you shall have it. If you're too generous to make terms, I'll state them for you. Poor Athénais shall pack her bags—I've had enough of tantrums. In my eyes gentleness is woman's most endearing quality," and regarding her leaning against the cushions, the shadowy dress, the pale hair, withdrawn face and whole passive body, was urged by his nature to re-possess that warm softness. He whispered, "I'll give you everything, my darling, you'll see," and the

stroking fingers tightened on the cool wrist. The touch, the caressing voice roused no emotion other than a tender disinclination to wound him by rejection. Loving him, pitying him, she was conscious of his inadequacy. The lesson of his teaching had been acquired ; in her turn she had passed him by.

*" But hearts that change,
Seek not old passions in a gay return,
Therefore I choose not you, loving you still,
For that old love was best for that old time."*

She saw herself sitting on the floor of Madame's bedroom, resentful, ready to drop with fatigue, but sustained by her new-found secret happiness. She saw the little purple velvet volume, the silver clasp, and the song of the English poet dancing up the page. Nothing could have made her unhappy that far-away night. It occurred to her that she was not unhappy now, in some new fashion stabilized.

She freed her hand, unconscious that she did so. She rose and looked down on him anxiously, as though inviting comprehension of a difficulty.

" I think—I want to be free."

Rapidly controlling his expression, he waited till she had amended, " I think it is good to be free," and then released the prick of humiliation in a tolerant smile.

" Freedom is a word, my dear ; no one is free. Duties, claims, our own weaknesses——" He shrugged. " Strike off one set of shackles and the next awaits ; which reminds me—what's all this about Bellefonds ? "

" You know what there is to know," she spoke uncomfortably. If unconsciously she had already dismissed the faithful friend, the memory of the freckled pleading face reproached her. The flush which warmed her face did not escape Louis.

" He's in love with you—very natural. He tells me he has hopes. No need to blush, my dear ; you are not in love with him. I am ignorant as to how matters stand between you, but one of my reasons for sending Colbert to bring you back was to prevent you from taking a step you would subsequently regret. I know you, and I wouldn't put it beyond you to have eloped with that fellow to-day."

Remembering the pictured flight into the unknown she

grew redder, but the slight to Bellefonds roused her to his defence.

"And if I had? Why should marriage with an honourable gentleman be a matter for regret?"

The dull eyes appreciated the warmth with a shrewd flicker.

"In the Pays du Tendre, my dear, the step one questions is usually a false one. Listen to me, Louise; listen to common sense. Marriage is a matter of paramount importance. One who values freedom should give it grave consideration."

"I have considered it and can find no particular cause for rejection."

"Then, my dear Louise, may I observe that your consideration has been perfunctory? Now I have given much thought to your affair—not merely to-day but since from my own observation I was made aware of M. de Bellefonds' sentiments. I find you ill-suited. You have, so far as I can discover, little in common beyond an inability to live within your means. I cannot conceive of a poorer foundation for a contented married life," he said it without a smile.

"Money is not everything." She said it bitterly.

"Debts are the very devil," he countered with a sudden break into spontaneity. "But that's not everything. He idealizes you, he doesn't know you. You've more penetration—you more or less esteem him for what he is, a pious, honest sort of person, but you're wilfully blind to everything save his obvious worth. If you allowed yourself to look beyond the honeymoon you'd see yourself dying of boredom;—unless you flew off to one of your convents first," he smiled at his friendly thrust.

She smiled back. "Maybe you're prejudiced, Sir."

"Jealous is on the tip of your tongue! I'll confess to a little natural spleen. But if I thought you'd find happiness with this man, it wouldn't weigh with me."

She persisted. "I do not agree that M. de Bellefonds and I are ill-suited; we are at least at one in our ideas of right and wrong."

"Insufficient," he dissented equably. "Come back to what I said respecting his inability to comprehend you. I take it you left the Tuileries on his advice? What retreat did he select for you? The Chaillot Visitation where they possess the best of both worlds—piety and a comfortable

life. A compromise. What does he design for you next? A marriage of esteem. Another second-best affair. For you, Louise, I ask you! For you, an extremist to your finger-ends. Now if you had done me the honour to consult me, my dear, I should have told you frankly—if you are set on religion out into the desert with you—sackcloth and ashes, God and the stars. Alternatively, a really furious love-affair. I can imagine you a *Grande Amoureuse*, my love, or starving yourself to skin and bone at the *Grandes Carmelites*; but *not* a pious lady at Chaillot Visitation and *not* the better-half of an upright and impecunious officer struggling to make both ends meet."

Again he chuckled at his unwonted excursion into imagination. She did not smile; after a silence she spoke suddenly.

"His aunt is Superioress there—at the *Grandes Carmelites*—she was only seventeen when she entered."

"Indeed?" he commented indifferently, reaching for his shoes with a foot. "Well at seventeen you made a better use of your time." Shod, he stood up, stretching himself and yawning before sitting down heavily again. "Poor woman, it is repugnant to think of a fresh young creature consigned to a living death. But girls of seventeen differ; I can't conceive of a Mlle de Bellefonds with the charm of my pretty little Mlle de la Vallière."

She recognized the tone; he felt better, and unashamed was minded to make love to her; he could not imagine but that it would be well received.

"My considered advice to you, my dear," he pursued blandly, pulling up a cushion beneath his head, extending his legs to the fire, "is this. Decline this proposal—kindly, of course; you don't want to hurt the poor man. He means well, but the thing is preposterous. You, a peeress of France, my intimate friend, the mother of my children—a beautiful, charming woman, if I may be permitted to say as much, you are a match for anyone in my kingdom. You must not marry beneath you."

"Beneath me!" The mounting self-glorification angered her. "How do you mean beneath me? There are those who would think twice before becoming the husband of your duchess."

"There are plenty would jump at the chance!"

"I do not doubt it," she said coldly. "Your Lauzun,

perhaps ; gentlemen who would hope to earn your favour by relieving you of me."

He held out his hand. "Ungenerous, Louise. Come here, sit down again ; I don't know the man worthy of you, on my life I don't. But a marriage of convenience can be a damned hard traffic. Unless your heart inclines you to Bellefonds, and I'll swear it doesn't, better make the best of the ill you know and put up with this poor sinner."

Disregarding the proffered hand, she stood pondering. Beneath all the complacency his conclusions were just ; he understood her as Bellefonds would never understand her ; he placed her on no pedestal, he would sacrifice nothing for her, he had injured her without scruple but he had power to divine her desire for the highest.

"Be sensible." He was coaxing her now. "Why keep up a grudge ? Come, are we to be friends again ? Be just, I have never vowed fidelity to you or any woman."

He watched the curving of the sweet sensuous mouth, a familiar and to him charming expression, a tender mockery.

"You vowed it to your wife."

"True, and you prove my point. That is the worst of wedlock. I have nothing against my wife, except that she is my wife. She is an admirable lady, but we are incompatible, and I resent finding myself compelled to an irregular life—I, who represent order and respect it. It is not agreeable to live perpetually at variance with oneself. I own I find it ludicrous that I, who solve the problems of a Kingdom, should be baffled by my own. Ah well ! Please sit down, Louise."

She obeyed automatically. The arm round her waist was not her lover's embrace, neither was it a constraint ; it did not even distract her perplexity. Her mind was absorbed in a search for a weapon with which to pierce the armour of this amazing materialist who could take thought for her damp clothing, who warned her against a loveless marriage, who could hand her his letter for the woman for whom he had deserted her, oblivious of the sensibilities of both.

She became aware of his voice, conceding magnanimously, "I do not complain of my lot. The calling of a king is great and noble ; it is delicious"—the suave voice caressed the word—"but I'll avow, my Louise, that might I ask one crowning gift from providence, it would be that of a

happy marriage. Blue Death ! I'm not difficult to please, you'll allow ; I could make any companionable woman happy—yourself, for instance."

She knew it came with blind sincerity from the man who had laid waste the lives of two women and would know no scruple in afflicting a third ; with sincerity, and with the satisfaction of one achieving a generous compliment. It filled her with dismay. He was blind, deaf—unreachable. She sat there appalled till his arm stole round her and he murmured, " This is like old times, you and I together by the fire." As his hand encroached she winced and pushed it away.

" You hurt me ! "

She dragged down the front of her bodice ; above her left breast was a small angry wound. He stared at it with horror.

" Good God ! How did you come by that ? It looks like a bite. What is it ? "

" Your Malice." Her face was colourless, her voice matched it in despair.

There was a silence, then with a rough, sudden movement he stood up.

She thought, his pride will never endure it ; he will go now. I have failed.

But he knelt down. He laid his shorn head on her lap. A longer silence passed before he whispered, " I had no idea. Forgive me—I do not deserve your kindness."

The bowed shoulders shook, his arms clasped her knees. Bending, she embraced him, and they stayed thus, in peace, the Comforter and the Comforted.

CHAPTER X

It is in these degenerate days M. Colbert did not know the meaning of peace, as he went to his bed that night the juggler with power might have been pardoned for thinking his day's work should have earned it.

He had proved his indispensability to his Master ; he had proved his omnipotence to his Master's mistress. The interview with the Marquise de Montespan had been emi-

nently satisfactory ; he had driven his good bargain. For Jean-Baptiste, who had served his apprenticeship in a sharp lawyer's office, who had profited under Mazarin, had handled a beautiful lady of high degree much as he would any ugly customer. The man who condemned gambling had invited himself to a game of cards. He had offered his antagonist a glimpse of his hand. There were some redoubtable cards in M. Colbert's stubby fingers : a King, two or three Knaves, and a Queen of Hearts whose suit might well prove trumps after all. There was an Ace of Hearts, too ; it looked more like a fragment of dry cheese as he produced it from his pocket-book. A fine hand was M. Colbert's hand—Madame's appeared hardly worth playing. At any rate, staring at that withered scrap which might have baited a last year's mousetrap, she appeared to have forgotten it was her turn to play.

"This first set me on your woman's track."

The lady, her rouge two dabs of scarlet on an ashy face, contrived to burst out shakily. What had it to do with her—why try to frighten her with such rubbish ?

M. Colbert agreed as to the rubbish, though surely now it was a strange object to find stitched into the bodice of Mme de la Vallière. Unfortunately the confidential Mlle des Oeillets had been detected in other queer purchases—traffic with sorcerers, criminals known to the Paris police. It was a bad case : blasphemy, witchcraft, even poisoning. The authorities held proof of the woman's complicity. She stood in danger of public prosecution and terrible punishment : flogging, branding, if no worse. Only M. Colbert's respect for her mistress could save the doomed des Oeillets (this consideration coming from M. Colbert being the more benevolent since the lady he addressed had scarcely shown herself his friend).

Extinguishing in folds of an equable and calculated contempt a last weak rally of a rage hitherto found to be an invincible weapon, M. Colbert turned to the subject of the lady who had always shown herself his friend ; who was now, while they were talking, entertaining His Majesty. The Duchess was in ignorance of the inexplicable interference of Mlle des Oeillets with her wardrobe. M. Colbert had been reluctant to worry her so long as it appeared to be just a little matter of feminine spite ; but as things stood to-day, Mlle des Oeillets having gone beyond charms to

potions—"Venomous drugs, my dear lady," and beyond Mme de la Vallière to—"I'll name no names," went on the gruff, persevering voice; "you'll understand me, Madame, and that the time has come to put the Duchess and perhaps others, on their guard."

He smiled sternly at the face out of which all beauty, all fight, even her native cunning, had been driven by stark fear.

"As a matter of fact," pursued M. Colbert, unpleasantly, "I should have taken up the matter with Mme de la Vallière to-day. It was on the tip of my tongue during our drive back from Chaillot, but she was so upset by the news of the King's ill-health I had not the heart. And now the King is passing the evening in her apartments, I'm told, and my opportunity is gone—till the morning. So having this evening free, Madame, I thought I could not employ it more usefully than by warning you, also, against your confidante."

He paused, but saw she was beyond speech. The hard scarlet mouth, twitching horribly, reminded him of a patient under a stroke. With the elation of a victor but a sober elation befitting a politician, M. Colbert proceeded to discuss his friend, Mme de la Vallière. His homely phrases depicted a pious creature with no ambition save His Majesty's well-being, soul—and body. Her heart was torn in two between her religion and her Sovereign. M. Colbert had not found her easy to persuade, but once convinced the King was ill she had laid scruples aside. Most affecting.

But M. Colbert, it seemed, had scruples concerning the re-establishment in the world of the lady he had wrested from Heaven.

"She is the last woman to be happy in a life at variance with her conscience. But of course to me His Majesty comes first. As soon as I heard that he was unwell I told myself, he'll need Madame Louise now, none other; and I was right. Never have I known our Master so insistent. Three messengers sent to Chaillot, one after the other. I was authorized to promise anything, *anything*, to induce her to return. Well, well, I succeeded, but it wasn't easy, and I may tell you without boasting, that no one but myself could have done it. Nevertheless," concluded M. Colbert, half-heartedly, "I regret it; for Mme de la Vallière, gentle, pious soul, is not suited for the exalted position she has

occupied, and still occupies, in His Majesty's affections. But all this is beside the mark ; to return to the matter in hand——"

Now he permitted her interruptions. He listened stolidly to a flood of denials, to her shameless sacrifice of the scape-goat he had offered her. Mme de Montespan had never really trusted this one of her attendants ; she had more than once suspected the wretched girl of being a liar, one who would fabricate any story to save her skin, but never, never would she have credited her capable of such abominations. What would M. Colbert in his kindness suggest she could do in this horrid situation ? Flogging was too good for wicked des Oeillets ; she deserved to be burned for a witch !

Kind M. Colbert shook his bullet head and dissented mildly. The delinquent could not be brought to the stake except after trial, and a public trial might be very unpleasant for others beside the culprit. The girl must be dismissed, of course : disappear. The good father of half a dozen daughters undertook to protect this erring female from the consequences of her misdeeds. A situation in a remote district ; strict supervision ; he knew of a trusty household.

Thus with scarcely veiled threats and insinuations more ominous than threats, and always in the same unemotional key, M. Colbert scourged his antagonist into a frenzy of jealousy and fear ; only one straw of hope was vouchsafed her. He made it clear that his object was not to change the partner of the royal bed so long as she kept her hands off the royal cup.

When at last she sat before him exhausted, defeated, M. Colbert proffered in a cool, business-like manner, the terms of his silence. An alliance. She to abandon Louvois and the War Party ; he to overlook the misdeeds of Mlle des Oeillets, provided—provided His Majesty kept in good health.

She grabbed at it ; promised everything ; agreed to everything. She wept and implored M. Colbert to believe her innocent. She would be guided by him henceforth.

M. Colbert believed as much of all this as he chose ; his last stratagem was to safeguard himself against his new ally. Another turn of the screw and she had written down for him the proof he required, the names not only of the sorceress,

La Voisin, but those of the unfrocked priest Guisbourg and the alchemist Le Sage.

When at the end of an hour he judged her bound hand and foot, Jean-Baptiste took his leave. His manners in bidding a lady good night left much to be desired. He did not even trouble to lift his hand to cover the yawn which prefaced his parting shot.

"Love philtres are a stupid expedient. They defeat their own end. A drugged man becomes sleepy, not amorous, as you may have remarked, Madame."

He left her to snarl and curse him, to bite her nails and hurl her hairbrush at the stupid face of the go-between who had let herself be caught out.

He made for his lodging, wheezing and coughing. Passing Louise de la Vallière's house, he shook his head at three long windows on the first floor.

"After that nice woman, to take up with a rotten bitch like that. It's beyond me!"

He sighed gently, mourning, maybe, another nice woman who should have been there to listen to the tale of the good day's work, but who was far away in Paris, and in any case never cared to listen to anything from him nowadays.

CHAPTER XI

JUNE, 1674

IN the month of June, birth month of her romance, season of her tragedy, Louise left the Palace of the King for the third time. Again her plan evinced no originality. She was bound for the Carmelites of the Rue d'Enfer in Paris.

The beautiful woman, not yet thirty, mother of two charming children, respected by the Queen, close friend of Monsieur and his second wife, the Duchess who could have married anywhere, had chosen a life of repellent austerity. It was inexplicable; enough to make worldlings shudder, more than enough to make those who loved her weep. None had been able to dissuade her. When the Maréchal de Bellefonds, that unfailing friend, urged the claims of her children, spoke feelingly of seven-year-old Marie-Anne, the

King's darling, now charming the Court with her fairylike dancing, "I see her with pleasure," answered this extraordinary mother, "I shall leave her without pain."

To the representations of her friends was added the caution of the Mother Prioress (in the world, Mlle Julie de Bellefonds), who from the first believing in the vocation of this strange postulant yet insisted on the King's formal consent before she would accept the Duchess de la Vallière. It was unnecessary in law, but she would take no risk of future scandal for her community.

Louis was obstinate in his refusal. He was not convinced of her vocation, he told Louise, adding kindly that in any case her health was too frail for such severity. If she was determined to embrace the religious life, he was prepared to make her Abbess of a less stringent order. "Have I conducted myself so well in the world that I should be fit to direct others?" she asked him sorrowfully.

There was a further obstacle—her debts. Louise had always been unpractical; since M. Colbert had relinquished the management of her estates her revenues had diminished, her charities increased. She must appeal to Louis again. "To be a Carmelite, that is nothing," she wrote to Bellefonds. "To speak to the King, there lies all my pain." At last she spoke—at last he yielded. Refusing, himself, to smooth her path to the convent door, he permitted payment of her debts to be made in the name of her little son, the Comte de Vermandois. He authorized the pensions she desired, a modest provision for her mother, her half sister, for each of her servants.

Madame de Montespan, for long now apparently on amiable terms with a rival she had ceased to fear, was aghast at this horrible precedent. "Such clothes, my dear—shoes without heels, hair shirts and the coarsest food! Your digestion will be ruined!" She sent her governess, that sensible woman, to remonstrate, but all Madame Scarron got for her pains was the information that the aspirant to Mount Carmel had been practising the Rule in private for months past; sleeping on the floor, abstaining from meat, game and even cream! Truly an impossible person! Monsieur had his own views on the subject; he bestowed them on his second wife, that substantial good-tempered soul who never made him feel a failure. Kindly Madame Charlotte opined and hoped that nice woman would be back in

six months : after the austerities of Carmel the poor Duchess would find herself in need of a little relaxation. Philip dissented amiably.

"You don't know her, my dear ; I do. Love's the only thing she's ever wanted. She wasted the best of her life loving my brother to distraction ; now she's going to spend the rest of it loving God to distraction. Impractical creature—head always in the clouds. Used to annoy Louis—he couldn't live up to it—but from all one hears *le bon Dieu* won't take it amiss. She won't come back, you'll see, my dear Charlotte. One can't fly higher than the stars." Philip laughed shrilly, partly at a felicitous phrase, and partly because he was nearer to tears than became the rôle of detached philosopher.

The third of June dawned cloudless, fresh and sweet. Thirteen years before, day for day, M. Fouquet's little protégée, youngest of the Maids of Honour, had started off for Fontainebleau in all the light-hearted delight of seventeen. Now Louise set forth on her last journey in a Royal coach. She had attended the King's Mass that morning, kneeling by his side. She had paid her formal adieux to the Queen, to Monsieur and Madame ; they had embraced her weeping.

She went down to her carriage on the King's arm. The Court had gathered to witness the departure. She had put on a beautiful sapphire blue gown, her hat was in the latest fashion, the fair curls under it elegantly dressed. She had a smile for everyone ; she was looking prettier than ever, they all said.

At the door of the coach the King removed his hat to kiss her on both cheeks, the salute proper for his "cousin," a Duchess of France. The man made no attempt to conceal his emotion.

"Au revoir," he insisted."

"A-Dieu." She said it as "To God."

He lifted in their two children, one after the other ; the little girl laughing, excited ; the little brother, his great dark eyes solemn and questioning. Gabrielle de la Vallière followed ; Madame Colbert was in the second carriage with Louise's brother and Bernard de Bellefonds.

Everyone was ready to start. But Louis delayed ; his eyes were on her face.

"Give me your hand," he said in a low voice. She held

it out with a lovely smile, full of kindness and love. He kissed the ungloved hand ; his ring was gone from it ; she had worn it day and night for thirteen years ; she had sent it back to him that morning.

"God keep you," she whispered, over the bent head.

He stood back unable to restrain his tears ; an hour later, they observed his eyes were still red.

The forbidding, heavily-clamped door clanged upon her ; the group of relations and friends re-entered the carriages. Marie-Anne burst into sobs. "I want Belle-Maman to come back !" But she soon cheered at sight of a Punch and Judy show at the corner of the Palais Royal. The little boy did not cry, neither did he laugh at Punch and Judy. The Aunt watched him uneasily—really the poor child looked very pale. Gabrielle was thankful to remember that they were nearly at Madame Colbert's and that that admirable woman stood as a mother to the poor little thing.

An hour later the King also left St. Germain in his coach. The campaign of 1674 was about to begin. Inauspiciously. He had plenty to trouble him as they left the Capital behind and drove out on the North East road.

Passing a village church, a group of peasants in black stood back to watch the cortège. A funeral was just over. Above, a bell mourned the years of the departed.

Louis was carried back. To a candle-lit room, to a woman standing apart from him ; her hair shone, she wore a loose gown of rose silk, a young mother bearing his child. Her face was full of fear—her voice was full of fear.

"They toll bells in those prisons. . . ."

He turned and began to talk loudly to Philip to shut out the voice and the bell.

EPILOGUE

SEPTEMBER, 1715

THE old man lay on his death-bed in his Palace of Versailles. He was dying, as befits a King, in Royal state and with exact observance. The pompous couch was curtained and overlaid with purple damask, stiff with gold, white plumes crowned each of the high bedposts. The lilies of France were blazoned above his head. An altar by the bedside glittered with candles as Mass succeeded Mass, each for his good estate. High dignitaries of Church and State crowded the great bedchamber, Holy of Holies to French men through half a century; the melancholy privilege of assisting at the passing of the Sovereign was not to be foregone.

He lay in the midst of all. The Royal bed was placed exactly in the centre and opposite the long windows looking on to his world-famous gardens. Despite the doctors' remonstrances, they were set wide; fresh air had always been a necessity for him.

He lay very still. On the white pillows, above the broad white linen of the sheet, the old face showed small and shrunken. The dry skin was bluish, the closed eyelids hollow, the mouth, sunken by loss of teeth years before, gasped feebly from time to time. An exhausted face but majestic still, engraved with patience and fortitude, a monument of will.

No one akin to him remained at the bedside. The surviving members of his family had paid their last respects, and few survived; none of his generation. Death was familiar in that Royal house where within the past few years He had claimed Monsieur Philip, Louis the Dauphin, (the aged King's sole legitimate child,) Louis his grandson, Louis his great-grandson. Three successive heirs to the Throne had been cut off in one year. Of his natural children, two sons and three daughters remained. These had taken leave of their father that morning. The two middle-aged men had displayed correct regret and timid respect. Of the sisters two had wailed and wept aloud. These four were the children of the disgraced and criminal woman, long

dead and longer forgotten, Athénais de Montespan, who had died lamentably, hag-ridden by her evil spirits.

The remaining daughter, Princesse de Conti, Marie-Anne, had behaved quietly. She had kissed the dry knotted hand lying on the bedcover, had knelt for her father's whispered blessing, but as she bent over him to kiss his forehead, he had felt tears upon his face. They comforted him. She was dearer to him than anyone on earth, though he had never been first to her; neither had the Prince, her husband. Her heart had been given to her brothers, first to Vermandois, dead in his youth, afterwards to Louis, son of Marie-Thérèse.

The father thought of her as his eldest daughter, his beautiful Marie-Anne—he rarely remembered that she was the child of Louise de la Vallière.

He had sent away his aged second and morganatic wife two days previously. It was too great a strain on a frail woman of eighty-one to sit by and watch him suffer; and he was dying slowly, in great pain. The treatment they applied to his gangrenous leg was barbarous; he endured the probing, the cauteries, without complaint. He would thankfully die but his heart was strong; he would expire by inches and he knew it.

In fifty-four years since Mazarin's death, he had never witnessed the actual passing of a human soul. It was contrary to Royal tradition; the King of France must stand in presence of King Death once only, and then alone. It mattered little to him; he had been alone his life long; he was feebly relieved when the farewells were at an end and he by himself.

He had left everything in order. Two days ago he had signed his last despatch; his testament was made; also a codicil checking the power of the Regent. First Prince of the Blood, his appointment was unavoidable, but Louis had no confidence in the dissolute, indolent man, son of the brother he had always trusted. He had caused the four-year-old Dauphin, his one surviving great-grandson, to be brought to his bedside to receive the commission which was to go down to generations. The quavering voice had searched for simple words. "My child, you are about to be King of a great nation. . . . Relieve your people as soon as you are able. . . . I have been too fond of war . . . do not imitate me in this. . . . Remember, no conquest is worth

the lives of your people. . . . Remember the words of your King and your father who sees in you all his children born again."

He had blessed the child and, smiling kindly at the awed and innocent face, had pitied the orphan destined from infancy, as he had been destined, for the same heavy burden.

He had made his soul. A general Confession ; Viaticum ; the Last Anointing. He had no fear for the hereafter as he lay in patience waiting for Death. Even his apprehension for the future of his realm, left impoverished at end of a long and bitter war to the hazards of a minority, had become blurred. When the hideous pain would let him think clearly he was chiefly grateful. God had been good. He had seen fit to afflict His servant's age with cruel bereavements, with crushing disasters ; there had been a day when a man of seventy-four had been faced with a choice ; peace, a necessity for exhausted France, but a peace to be bought by the desertion of his ally, Spain, or the continuance of hostilities—a hopeless alternative with the forces of the powerful coalition victorious upon his borders. He had not hesitated—there was a depth to which a King might not sink ; he had been prepared to ride northward at head of his last army to throw it between his capital and Lille, but God had been good ; he had lived to see the tide of fortune turn and victory sufficient to ensure an honourable treaty. France, his France, stood uninvaded, her frontiers firm, firm as they were to stand for a hundred and fifty years.

France was whole, but she had bled white. He thought of her with pity and compunction. "I have been too fond of war," came from his heart. Yet he was not conscious of failure. His life work was done, well done, errors notwithstanding ; he had given it of his best.

He was not unhappy, lying there in the solitude of his crowded sickroom. Kingship, the supreme vocation which had inspired his youth, intoxicated his manhood, had proved the comfort of his age. The price paid for it had been extreme ; an utter isolation. A high price but not too high ; he had never thought it too high.

Now, bodily strength exhausted, the firm intellect bewildered with opiates, will alone surviving, he wandered as the aged are prone to wander, in the past. Not in the

noontide of his strength those flaming years of glory, not often in his aspiring youth, but in the gentle world of childhood. Through the eyes of a child he beheld his mother; a protective presence, a soft bosom, kind arms. A face accompanied hers. Old Mazarin, smiling, friendly, enigmatic. "Abdicate!" He laughed at the wry jest! (Around him, they heard it as a laboured breath from the depths of the State bed.) Philip scampered in and out, impish, laughing, teasing, squirting water at him from his casting bottle. Wait till he got hold of him! Henriette was singing one of her little foreign rhymes, the Minette of eight, a little thin stick of a thing, chirping with a sweet reedy little pipe. "The bones of the Holy Innocents!" he mocked into Philip's ear. Laporte was often here; at times he sat in his winged arm-chair, his horn-handled knife open, cutting his beautiful switches, one for Phil, one for him. Sometimes he told them fairy tales. "The Prince set out to slay the Dragon." Best of all, he carried a little boy who could not sleep into his own warm bed. . . .

He was visited by all these dear ones, but Marie Mancini, Athénais, Louise, never joined their company. Even his Last Confession had scarcely recalled these faded figures to his memory. He had sinned, he had caused others to sin; through his own most grievous fault!

What a noise! Heavy footsteps, scraping, scuffling, dragging up the stone stairs. He must hide! (The attendants marked it as a distress moving the grey and rigid face.) He must lie still under the bedclothes—how heavily they weighed upon his panting chest—lie still and pretend to be asleep. His forehead was wet, his heart turned over; the mob was pressing round his bed. A touch which made his blood run cold. Fear? He need never fear! The old Archbishop whispered his promise. He was anointed, crowned, set high above all men, answerable to God alone. His blood ran hot and proud. *The King!* (He is fighting for life; they said it awestruck.)

But where *was* God in this torture, surging fire from his tormented leg? Wave upon wave, black as night, red as blood, speckled like a reptile's skin. Is this Hell? Have mercy on me, oh God! Far away, a voice repeated it for him. The agony forced back consciousness; he knew they were cauterizing him again; he braced his spent body for the last exercise of will.

Ah—thank God ! The pain was fading, fading into a soft mist. There was no pain. Sunshine lay all along the lane, a stream of gold glittering on fresh green. The sky was high and blue. Larks sang aloft in it. His hale body was erect in the saddle, his strong thighs urged against the glossy flanks of his mare, his splendid Soleil. The scented breeze kissed his cheeks, his hair flew back with it. He was riding, racing, singing for joy.

“ Who is Sylvia ? What is she ? ”

Jump down now. This is the appointed place. In the coolness, beneath the golden trees. Steady, my Soleil, patience ! A few moments, it won't be long. Round the bend of the lane, listen, approaching !

His heart was bursting with joy. (It is the agony, they whispered.)

Oh, welcome my delight—coming at last—hastening, arms outstretched, a world of love in a heavenly face. . . .

“ Louise ! ”